O'Conner's Career

BY

ROBERT COSMO HARDING

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BASIC THEME

There is a lasting better self in the worst character—and it can be permanently brought to life by the proper influence and appeal.

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THE CHARACTERS

James O'Conner, *with Aliases.*
Bud Hicks, *with Aliases.*
Odette Simpson, *a Social Worker.*
Silas Simpson, *Her Father.*
Dustin Chalmers, *Her Lover.*
Harry Neill, *Chief of Detectives.*
Paul Jeffries, *Sergeant of Detectives.*
William Knight, *Police Inspector.*
Jackson Miller, *Penitentiary Warden.*
Mother Haley, *a Friend of Crooks.*
Edward Havelin, *Salvation Army Santa Claus.*
Salim Hagan, *a Crook, also a Penitentiary Guard.*
Oscar Baxter, *Superintendent of Sunday School.*
Alex Mangold, *a Detective.*
Earl McClatch, *a Real Estate Dealer.*
Dan Hawthorne, *Saloon Owner.*
Malcolm and Abner Spruce, *Farmer Brothers.*
Henry Warren, *with Aliases.*
Morgan, *Police Secretary.*
Dr. George Edward Fleming.
Sloan "Doc" Meyer.
And Other Minor Characters.

O'CONNOR'S CAREER

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING O'CONNER

That all humanity, individually, is a slave to habit and to circumstances is a fact recognized beyond all contradiction. Yet there is another phase of life, sovereign of all, and unless we be abnormal exceptions, the leash which fetters us thereto cannot be severed by even the most violent forces. This is environment.

James O'Conner was a victim of environment. He was nothing more or less than a thief. Harry Neill was a product of environment. He was a catcher of thieves. Bud Hicks was an abnormal exception to environment. He was O'Conner's pal. William Knight, another victim of environment, had, figuratively, turned turtle characteristically. He was an enemy to the class under which O'Conner was catalogued by society. Paul Jeffries was a victim of circumstances. He was a working companion of Knight. Odette Simpson was a girl who

attempted to wrest from environment its victims. Sometimes she was successful, more times she was not. Thus is evinced that even though we be born under different astrological conditions, at one time or another in life there is an intermingling of influences, the effect of which upon each individual life can only be impressive if the proper appeal is made with sufficient force at the psychological period.

A man can accept the theories and believe in the teachings of progressiveness without having one initiative of progress himself. So, too, can a man believe in the theories and in the teachings of conventional society, most fittingly corralled in the immortal Ten Commandments. However, to carve a worthy niche in the world wherein a man lives, no matter what the dimensions of its scope, he must first evince his faith in those laws handed down to posterity by God through Moses on Mount Sinai, and must have in his makeup a goodly share of initiative progressiveness. A man may have a superabundance of initiative progressiveness, but while he believes in the theories advanced by the Ten Commandments and lived by the greatest majority, yet does not evince his belief, he it is who will make an unworthy niche in the annals of deeds. To this latter class, at first, belonged James O'Conner.

. . . . . .

Jackson Miller, Warden of the penitentiary, sat before his desk poring over a ledger. He was alone.

Presently he pressed a small call-button beside the desk and when an orderly answered it he looked up with a deep scowl and instructed: "Bring Number 75203."

The guard took the numbers on a small slip of paper so as to make no mistake and departed to carry out the chief's orders. He was like an automaton.

Immediately he was alone again Miller arose and going to a small cupboard-like piece of furniture that covered one wall and extended from ceiling to floor, ran his eyes along the various sections until he found that which he sought—a small piece of paper pasted to the iron near the key-lock and upon which had been written in with a typewriter the numerals 75203. He inserted a key in the lock and, pulling out the drawer, removed therefrom its contents, consisting of a pair of civilian trousers, a civilian coat, a light colored shirt with collar attached and a few trinkets, which, although they may have had some intrinsic value, would have been sneered at by the lowest and most tawdry pawnbroker. These he gingerly carried to the table and placed them thereon, then returned to his desk.

Less than ten minutes later the door of the warden's office was flung open and there entered a man, who despite the prison pallor, was imposing in appearance; a youngish man whose eyes twinkled and whose features expelled an air of nonchalance. Fol-

lowing this individual, almost upon his very heels, was the guard.

Miller again scanned the ledger before him and in a monotonous tone read therefrom: "75203—James O'Conner, alias Con." He looked up, then toward the man for confirmation of the correctness of the record. The scowl returned to give rise to the impression that he was mean to the point of cruelty, although such an estimate of Miller would have been far from a true valuation, for he was a staunch advocate of the theory that human beings are human beings, and whether they have erred or not, all should be treated in the best possible manner.

O'Conner gave vent to a short, mirthless laugh and said: "Mr. Miller, this is the third time since you have been warden here that I have faced you in just this way. Seems to me you ought to know me by now."

Miller's scowl deepened, if that were possible, and he explained: "It's merely a matter of custom, O'Conner—and custom runs things here."

"Custom runs things pretty near every other place, too," observed O'Conner. "If it hadn't been for the custom of the police trying to arrest violators of the law, I wouldn't be in this room at this particular minute."

Miller did not continue the subject, but, taking from a small tin box a five-dollar gold piece, he handed this and the clothes he had taken from the locker to O'Conner with the words: "Con, try and

see how long you can keep away from here—I mean in a compulsory way."

Again the short, mirthless laugh and O'Conner said: "That is the hardest thing I have to do—nor would I ever be here if it weren't for the police."

Miller dismissed the guard and showed O'Conner where he could change from prison garb to the clothes which he had worn when he had entered the penitentiary eighteen months before. Then when this change was effected and O'Conner stood before him ready to leave, he invited him to sit down. O'Conner guessed what was coming and he was ready for it.

Said Miller: "It's too bad that a man of your calibre should lead such a life. Why don't you take a good hold of yourself and turn to a worthier occupation? There's just as much money in it, if not more—and there is far less danger."

O'Conner had his answer ready even before the warden had finished speaking and he questioned the logic in the summing up of the two lives, just verbally pointed out to him, by the contradiction: "I don't agree with you, Warden Miller—nor do I think that I ever shall. You just said that there's more money in the other life, in business, and that it's safer. But is it? You can lay a hundred to one on it and win, hands down, when you say no. I'm not such a simpleton but that I haven't looked into the other side of the game—and I found that there's more danger there. A fellow sinks a lot

of money into business and it's a chance whether he's going to pull out even or lose every red cent of it."

"But you don't have to go into business for yourself—you can work for someone else and then you are sure to have something every pay-day," argued the other.

"Hm! Wouldn't I be a fine whistle-serf? And how do I know that I'll get an envelope every pay-day? Don't you know that there are some bosses who know only two words and that is, 'You're fired.' No siree, as long as I can pull the long green from someone else without drawing his blood, I'll stick to the game I've learned and take the safer chance—that of being caught by the bulls."

"But you haven't tried the other game."

"I don't have to. As I told you before I'm no boob and I've heard enough to put me wise for my entire life."

Miller shrugged his shoulders expressively as a signal that he recognized the futility of further argument and, arising as a hint that the hour for O'Conner's dismissal was at hand, he said: "Very well, O'Conner, I suppose that you know what you are doing and, as I have done all I can to reform you, I am shifting the blame to your shoulders for your future conduct."

"Wouldn't misconduct sound better?" suggested he who had been convict number 75203.

"Perhaps it would. But that's not the question

at point. Most men who are sent here look upon a penitentiary—and a jail, too, for that matter—as a place where punishment is meted out only. But they're wrong. A penitentiary is a place where we put those who infringe upon the laws laid down by society in order that they may see the error of their ways and come out better men. If they don't come out with a wholesome respect for right doing it's their fault, not ours." His voice was heavy with the earnestness of these enunciations and revealed that he firmly believed them.

O'Conner parted his lips to refute that which he had just heard, but, thinking better of the matter, he held out his hand to Miller who grasped and shook it, then, pivoting on his heel, he strode, erect of carriage and head held high, out of the room and later out upon the street. He was once more a "free" man.

CHAPTER II

O'CONNER MAKES A DECISION

O'CONNER's third undoing had been entirely of his own making, that is, the police had had nothing whatsoever to do with it. Not an ordinary thief, as a generale rule, although if a golden opportunity to pick someone's pocket or to put through some other mediocre deal presented itself, he was not the one who would overlook its consummation. This was his creed.

O'Conner's last escapade had consisted of the working of a new confidence wrinkle through the aid of Uncle Samuel's Postal Service, without the sanction of that powerful collective personage. Something, somewhere, had gone radically wrong and so O'Conner had come a severe cropper and the whole affair had simmered down to a bungling mess, shamefully unprofessional for one who was peerless in the rank and file of the cult. But O'Conner, as a get-rich-quick schemer, had been shown by the Government Inspectors that he was non importé.

Now that he had served his time for this offense,

it was a forgotten incident and merely an incident and, as he himself termed it: "a misapplication and misjudgment of the proper business methods that should have been pursued." He had other things, far more important than post-mortems, to occupy his time and attention, and so, intent upon accomplishing these acts, he started to walk briskly down the street.

A square farther on he became sensitive to the fact that it was cold and that little flakes of snow persisted in escaping from the banks of clouds overhead. It had been summer when he had entered the penitentiary. Now it was winter, three days after Thanksgiving. A man does not wear heavy clothing and an overcoat in June in any city east of the Rocky Mountains; nor does he, by his own choice, wear light-weight clothing and no overcoat when the temperature is hovering below the freezing point. O'Conner, not by his own choice, was clad in raiment that would have been entirely comfortable had the temperature been seventy-five or eighty degrees, and so it is small wonder that forcefully he should become aware of the condition of the greater elements. Therefore, he turned his coat collar up about his neck and lowered the brim of the front of the Fedora hat he wore, thereby presenting an appearance diverse to the usual, immaculately clad individual he ever was, no matter what the game he pursued. But Con had the satisfaction of knowing that immediately he reached

the city wherein he had established an enviable reputation among his kind, at Mother Haley's there reposed in a certain room sufficient togs so that he would not be necessitated to lose his reputation as the best dressed man in the profession.

Con's first objective point was the railroad yard and this place he soon reached. Next we find him a passenger on a Pullman, de luxe, and as he continued his journey thereon, he realized that the air was intensely and bitterly cold.

The very small amount of money which reposed securely and snugly in an inside pocket of his coat and which, incidentally, was the old cash that he possessed in the whole world, he was saving for food and lodging when he should arrive in town and until he could put through a deal.

Con did not gaze at the landscape flashing by, from a beveled plate-glass window. That sort of thing was for the future. But from underneath the Pullman, where he clung to a cross-bar with grim and desperate determination he could see the fields covered with snow. And the swirl and the eddy caused by the sixty-mile-per-hour rush of the train flung the snow with stinging cruelty into his face. Yet, soon he became accustomed to this, in fact, it, in a vague sort of way, lulled him into a peaceful frame of mind and he gave himself over to the consideration of other things.

Thus and presently from out the flashings of memory and the varied plans for the future there

stood forth the talk with Miller in his office, just a few hours previously.

Miller's words had sunk deeper than Con had intimated to the warden and although he had refuted with logical argument, every theory advanced, he still was inclined to accept Miller's views as the more wholesome. Nor did it take such an unconscionable period of mental strife to place Con in a position and in a frame of mind where Miller's arguments began to bear fruit, ultimately resulting in Con deciding to take a "lick" at the new "graft."

Hours later O'Conner recognized the outskirts of the city, his destination, and, a little farther on, as the train stopped for a set block in the outer yards, he, with proper precaution, slipped from his none too comfortable berth and as cautiously made his way to the nearest tramway line.

It was snowing copiously now and the wind persisted in howling a perfect gale, but Con did not mind this so much, for after the hardships he had encountered during the six hours enroute, this, in comparison, was like unto May-day.

The first penny that O'Conner spent was given to the conductor of the tramway—five pennies it was, to be explicit—to carry him to the heart of town. He entered the car and, again for precaution, found a seat toward the front end. It was a long ride and presently, the car being warm, Con had a sense of feeling very comfortable. Also he was tired, physically fatigued, but even so he did

not doze because he was too ideal a professional to take the chance of running afoul an officious gumshoe and be awakened with no consistent answer to the question that would be asked of him. Not that for him! He had his answer ready now, as he ever did when awake, a sort of alibi it was, and, consequently, there was never any Waterloo for him. But fortunately his ride was without one interesting incident. In order to keep awake he counted all the new buildings along the thoroughfares through which the car passed and kept tab on all those newly painted; thus his mind was continuously occupied until he alighted at a corner presided over by Traffic Officers.

Making his way to a nearby street, he entered a second-hand store where he purchased a heavy suit of clothes, a clean flannel shirt with collar attached and a pair of trousers and before he changed to these, he went into a rear room where he washed his face and ears and neck and hands. He did not care to risk going to Mother Haley's first, for obvious reasons. After that he crossed the street to a cafeteria and had a modest meal. Fifteen minutes later he was again on the street, along which he made his way, with a brisk gait, to a large building two squares distant, the City Hall.

Into the City Hall he went and entering the elevator stepped out on the second floor. Adown a long corridor he traversed, passed innumerable

offices, until he reached a door marked with enamel letters: DETECTIVE BUREAU.

To the clerk in the outer office O'Conner said: "Tell the Colonel that Con wants to see him."

The clerk, a new incumbent, first stared in amazement, then asked: "Con who?"

A slight smile crossed Con's features as he answered: "Just plain Con. C-O-N."

The clerk departed and upon his return requested O'Conner to follow him.

"Glad to see you, O'Conner," Harry Neill, Chief of Detectives, thus extended greeting, and rising, extended his hand. Then invited: "Sit down, Con, and help yourself from that box of cigars," indicating a box of two for a quarter guaranteed Havanas.

O'Conner allowed the smile of an absolute skeptic to usurp his features as he extracted a cigar from the box and, at the same time seated himself, while he remarked: "Are you really glad to see me? I doubt it. Of course for one reason you're glad but honor bright now, way down deep in your heart there's the wish that they'd kept me up there for the rest of my life. But that's neither here nor there, for I'm here." He paused to look around him and then returning his attention to Neill he observed verbally: "Hasn't changed a bit—same old decorations, same old desk, even the same old air of half-smoked cigars."

Neill laughed rather raucously and admitted:

"We haven't changed a bit here—and we hope that the new administration will see fit to let things alone."

Said O'Conner: "It would indeed be a sinful shame to remove an ornament like you. Of course you know what the profession calls you? Handsome Harry!" Here he laughed long and good-naturedly and repeated: "Handsome Harry! It's funny how they will persist in twisting actual facts. They'd probably call a mud fence on a rainy day beautiful, too."

Harry Neill was not even good-looking—and he knew it. At the age of forty-three, almost bald, with a colorful nose-end that told of debauches earlier in life and that reminded one of a person suffering with a bad cold in his head, his face never shaven clean and always one side of his cheek distended because inside reposed a generous wad of chewing tobacco, his lower lip scarred by a bullet wound he had received years ago, he presented any but the appearance of a Beau Brummel. He would have liked to have resented O'Conner's ridicule, but for diplomatic reasons he merely smiled, rather sourly it is true, and returned: "Handsome is as handsome does—and that's you. Lord! but if I was as fine to look at as you I'd get me a job as an artist model—a sort of masculine Venus de Milo, you know—instead of always itching to put my hands on something that didn't belong to me. I've never known it to fail but that good looks didn't

spoil a man—and more'n half of them ain't got more sense than an ordinary hobo."

O'Conner repudiated the other's estimate by asseverating: "But you'll allow that there are some of us Julian Eltinges who are a damn sight cleverer than you and your underlings."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that!"

"Well, I am. And I can prove it. I've pulled off, in the last five years, just about sixty jobs and only twice could you lay your hands on me."

"Three times," corrected Neill.

"Three times nothing. This last time it was Uncle Samuel's move that did the trick."

Neill now thought it better to change the subject and he did so by picking a telegram from a pile on his desk and, handing it to O'Conner, said: "I expected you to-day or to-morrow. That just came in a minute before you did."

While the Chief had been talking Con had perused the message and now he queried: "Well, I did the proper stunt, didn't I?" And followed this with the hypothetical recitation: "James O'Conner, alias Con, late Convict number 75203. Report to Headquarters immediately upon arriving in town or be nabbed first crack out of the box and be shoved out of the way again. The Unwritten Law of the Police." He laughed rather hollowly.

Neill laughed too, but its sound was in harsh opposition and it was several minutes before he was able to say: "I guess you know the rules all right—

fact, you ought to seeing that you're as old a hand at the game as I am at mine. But how did you like your vacation? Let me see—fourth time wasn't it?"

Con shook his head wearily. "Your memory is bad. Come again. You were one too many. You lose." He jerked the sentences out in staccato succession, then, in a slower way, he yielded for the other's benefit: "I didn't like it a little bit. And you know it. It's a Hell of a place—sours one too much. I'd much rather do time in the works because there's more excitement—and you know that you won't be there for long."

The Chief of Detectives nodded agreement. Some discipline up there, eh? Sort o' make you walk the white mark? But it's fine training, it is."

"It's the sort of training that doesn't agree with a fellow," scowled Con.

"Well, not to change the subject again but more to make the most of our time, how long are we going to have you with us this trip? I was hoping that you'd give us a little rest."

"Come again," Con shot forth. "What do you want—a job watching a grave-yard? Didn't you have an eighteen months' rest? What do you think the citizens of this burg give you six thousand a year for anyway? Not for class, surely! And you fellows never turn out for the annual inspection like the harnessed bobbies. But, seriously speaking, I'm dead on the rough stuff. There's nothing in it ex-

cept the high and the low and half the time a fellow doesn't know the altitude."

Neill's brows knitted in perplexity and he queried: "What do you mean by high and low? That's a new one on me."

"So you admit that you're not wise to everything. Well, in the words of Hank Doyle, high is when youse is got de cush and low is when youse ain't got the price of er cigarette snipe. But, to come to the point, I'm going to get a job—a decent, honest job."

Neill scrutinized Con steadily for a brief season while the subject of this searching returned the gaze unwaveringly. Then: "Is that straight?" asked the Chief, his joy but thinly veiled.

"Have you ever caught me telling a lie?" demanded O'Conner petulantly, and then, ere the other could utter a word, he answered himself: "No, you bet you haven't. It doesn't pay to lie, even if you are a—a crook. You get caught sooner or later. And I suppose that we—you and I and those engaged in similar professions—learn that sooner than your every-day, average man." He puffed thoughtfully at his cigar for some time then essayed to acquaint the other with the run of his thoughts by stating: "There's no use for me to try to work in society again for everyone knows me now and even if I did get to any affair I'd be watched like a hawk."

Neill continued his scrutiny of Con and, still a bit

incredulous, more so from force of habit than from any doubt as to the latter's intentions, he asked: "What are your plans? What do you intend to do —what sort of work?"

"Oh, there are several positions that I'm capable of holding down—salesman or—"

"Have you anything in view, anything tangible?" Neill smiled because of his present vocabulary and the impression that he thought it would make upon O'Conner, but the truth is that occasionally Neill would hear some new word and looking up its definition in a dictionary, he would employ that word upon every opportune occasion.

Whether or not Con had been impressed as Neill desired, the latter never knew. Said Con: "Oh, I'm not worried about being offered something reasonable—and on a silver platter at that." His confidence in his statement was remarkable.

"How much money have you? You didn't have much when you were sent up, if I remember right."

"Not much. I had a V when I landed but that's got down to three dollars and thirty cents. How did I spend it? Well, five cents went for carfare, a dollar for this suit, four bits for the shirt and three jitneys for something to eat. Does that make it?"

"Sort of spending money like a drunken sailor, I should say," laughed Neill. And, forthwith, reaching into his trousers' pocket he extracted a

five-dollar gold piece and extended it toward O'Conner.

"Yes, it is," returned the other, "considering that my tailor bill just before I tried to turn that scheme that sent me up was nearly two hundred bucks." He accepted the money with the stipulation: "I'll take this on condition that you consider it a loan."

"Just as you wish. But take my advice and don't be so cock-sure about landing a job. It's been a pretty tough winter so far and there are more than twenty-five thousand people out of work right here in this town, besides what with Thanksgiving just passed and Christmas not so far in the offing, the charity organizations and the Salvation Army have been swamped. You know the Army had a bad fire night before last—their West End Citadel burned—six killed. That puts them to onery straights."

O'Conner displayed only a latent interest and enquired: "Any of the Salvationists or firemen kick in?"

"No—only lodgers."

O'Conner frowned and corrected: "You mean only bums and hoboes." Then continued unsympathetically, even with a hint of joy in his voice: "And a damn good thing it was. They're better off dead anyway and so is the world. Nothing but a lot of drunks who beg the price of a good-sized souse all day and then pawn themselves off to the

Bootheries with the spiel that they want their souls saved. To Hell with their lying souls! If they weren't so lazy and such cowards they'd be the worst desperados imaginable and two to one they'd use a gattling gun on rich and poor alike. I've knocked many of them flat who've come up to me with their whining shots, because they're a disgrace to humanity."

"But they're human just the same."

"Oh, yes," sneered Con, "they are human parasites and disease breeders. I have no use for them and I'd sooner touch a skunk than to lay alongside of one."

"But haven't circumstances made them what they are?"

Con shook his head emphatically, saying: "Not so that any one could notice it. Circumstances never make a man so lazy that he can't keep his body clean. Only the rich and the poor, the smart and the stupid are influenced by circumstances."

The telephone buzzer on Neill's desk sounded and while he answered O'Conner arose and examined some old-fashioned guns that hung on the wall. And when, a minute later, the Chief replaced the receiver on the hook, Con returned to his chair to be informed:

"That was Jeffries. He saw you come out of Libon's second-hand store but lost you. I told him you were here. And now, to show you that I'm willing to help you along the narrow path, I'll issue a blanket order to let you severely alone. Suppose

you try to land a decent position. And call me up. But remember, the first crooked move you make we nab you and—"

O'Conner arose and Neill followed suit. The two men shook hands and Con departed with the words: "I'll remember."

CHAPTER III

OLD CRONIES

THERE is an Arabic proverb which says: "A wise man's day is worth a fool's life." Yet life is a sentence of philosophical composites with good, bad and indifferent points; to some consistent, to others incongruous; but we must all read it through to the period—the period of death.

Neill and his associates looked upon O'Conner and his cult as fools while O'Conner and his associates looked upon Neill and his cult as fools. And who is there to say which, at the period of life, should prove to be correct?

Neill's position precluded in the minds of the public the thought that he was not a model of the most honorable: but should an upheaval of investigation into the methods of the Department come, which was likely any day, there would be discovered that Neill derived monetary revenue from other sources than his salary.

O'Conner was pointed out as a warning to all who would digress from the Commandment: "Thou shalt not desire thy neighbor's wife, neither shalt

thou covet thy neighbor's house, his field or his man-servant, or his maid-servant, his ox, or his ass or any thing that is thy neighbor's."

The difference between Neill and O'Conner reposed in the fact that the former violated his trust surreptiously while the latter violated but one of the laws of society and did that almost openly. So, taking all in all, the estimate of the world is based upon that which we know. And thus we have the basis of paralogism.

Leaving the City Hall, O'Conner walked rapidly down the street until he reached Fulton Avenue and continued on up this thoroughfare, which was a misnomer for it was nothing more or less than a widened alley.

Before a two-story squat brick building, which unmistakably showed the ravages of time, he halted and, looking hastily up and down, entered. The first floor was occupied by a saloon and as O'Conner entered and was recognized the greetings extended to him were heartily and sincerely effusive. Some half dozen men were sitting at the various tables and at the front of the bar stood an even dozen. All were drinking. O'Conner edged his way forward to where a space was made for him and the bartender, in a loud voice, enquired:

"What'll y' have—on th' house?"

"The same thing—ginger-ale with a dash of lemon."

"So you're still teetotal," observed the man next to him.

"Lay your money on it," answered Con and continued: "And I always will be. Too many times it has proved the undoing of an otherwise crackerjack sport."

While this was going on there had entered the saloon a well, yet plainly dressed man who, casting his eyes over the crowd and catching sight of O'Conner, immediately made his way to him, and when he had reached his side he administered a friendly whack upon his back and greeted: "Well, of all good sights you're the best! When did you get in?"

O'Conner looked around and with joyous accent said: "Hello, Bud Hicks! I landed about three hours ago and have just come from a little confab with our mutual friend, Neill." His eyes sparkled brilliantly.

Said Hicks: "Fine and dandy and welcome home." With which words he ordered a rye and soda and, holding his glass aloft, fairly shouted: "Here's a welcome to Jimmy O'Conner!"

Everywhere glasses were raised and the toast was drunk with a will that showed the esteem in which O'Conner was held by the patrons of Reagan's.

After there had been several more rounds of drinks, O'Conner and Hicks made their way to the pavement. It was snowing outside and growing colder, and as Hicks buttoned the collar of his

great-coat closer about his neck he glanced at Con and inquired:

"Where's your overcoat?"

"We're going to get it now—it's with my other duds up at Mother Haley's. I dropped in there" —indicating Reagan's—"with the hope of seeing you."

Hicks frowned and surmised: "Then you haven't heard. Mother Haley died more than three months ago."

Con stopped aghast, for the news was quite a blow to him. Mother Haley had gained her soubriquet many years ago because of the fact that she was a friend of those who lived in the precarious sort of way that society frowns upon. And many and many a time when one of her roomers had been down and out or ill, it was Mother Haley's bountifulness that had enabled the individual to tide the chasm—and the good old soul never so much as asked for monetary compensation, although it is a fact to be recorded to the credit of the recipients of these humanitarian acts that she was never allowed to be any save a gainer thereby. It was several minutes ere Con could speak, and then he inquired:

"Did she—she have a peaceful death?"

Hicks nodded. "She died happy, for all the boys who could get there in time were about the bedside as she passed into the Great Beyond. And you

should have seen her coffin and her grave! There was no end of flowers."

Con showed perturbation and presently evinced the trend of his thoughts by stating more to himself than to his pal: "I guess I'll have as much chance to get my duds as an amateur yegg has of putting through a neat job."

Hicks substantiated this by saying: "You hit it there, all right. When we went back after the funeral there wasn't a stitch of clothing to be seen anywhere—they even took Mother Haley's jewelry.

"Who do you mean by they?"

"Search me—but we have our suspicions and they don't lie a hundred miles away from Police Headquarters either."

Con muttered an oath as he proceeded in silence with Hicks to the main thoroughfare. Here he showed that his mind still dwelt upon the loss of his clothes by guessing: "More than likely some of those movie-actors are sporting them now."

"Don't you ever fool yourself. Anything that was worth while in that collection, Friends Bobbies couldn't be pried lose from with a submarine torpedo hitting them broadside."

Again a considerable space was traversed in silence until Hicks inquired pointedly: "How much money have you?"

Con laughed as though Hicks had just told him a rip-snorting joke and answered: "Eight dollars and thirty cents."

Bud grunted. "Hm! That won't carry you very far."

"I didn't say it would. But it will have to do until I hit something."

Hicks in silence considered the proposition, then suggested: "How about letting me stake you until you make a ten strike?"

Con demurred. "I don't think much of your suggestion because you'd have to stint yourself for me and that's just what I'll not let you do."

"No danger of that," Hicks assured him, explaining: "I've made two good hauls in the last thirty days." Then, taking his pal's acquiescence for granted, he said: "Now let's see. First you need a new outfit to put some class to you, for there's nothing that makes so much for success nor that makes such a good impression as a nifty appearance. And then—well, and then a porterhouse dinner. You can bunk with me until you get on your feet. I have a large room just two squares from the avenue."

O'Conner's manner still indicated his hesitation and he said: "But maybe you won't want to be so generous when you hear that I'm going to strike the straight and narrow path."

"The deuce you say!" cried Hicks, halting and turning to face the other.

"That's straight goods," asseverated Con, rather sheepishly. "It is true."

Hicks put forth his hand and, as Con grasped it,

he promised with a staunchness in his voice that somehow succored the spirit of the other: "If that's so, you can count on me sticking to you so much the more. Gosh, I wish I could keep my fingers off of property that doesn't belong to me," and he ended lamely: "but I can't."

"I'm not so sure that I'll be able to. But it's mighty good of you to stake me, Bud, and I'll—"

Bud interrupted him with: "Nix on that palaver, Con, 'cause it don't go with me. Haven't we turned more'n one trick together and, holy smoke, if we don't stand by one another who will, I'd like to know? And I don't want to discourage you, but it's a hand-out to a swell blowout that you'll not find any job, any decent job worth while growing on a tree waiting for you to pluck it. There never was a sign on a good job that said 'Welcome.' And there's a lot of truth in that highbrow saying that when a man's in the dust there's a thousand feet trying to kick him into the mud puddle. Believe me or not, I know what it is, 'cause I've tried the decent racket and know what you're bucking, while this is your first whack at it. Anyway, Old Scout, I hope luck comes your way."

By this time they had reached the street wherein was located the rooms of Bud Hicks, and in silence they turned into it. Con's emotions were too varied for immediate speech, while the non-communicative mood of Hicks was due to the formulation of other ideas.

CHAPTER IV

CON RETRENCHES

Things great but distant may, at the present, appear insignificant, yet that does not alter their character nor does it make them less great, for it is merely the distorted individual vision. So it was with O'Conner. And now, at the end of his first day's search for a decent job, as he sat telling his experiences to Hicks, he was beginning to realize the truth in it. Said he:

"The first place I struck was a tailor's lay-out. Did they have a job? Yes, they did. Would they take me on? Yes, they would. When could I start? Immediately. And, please, how much do I get? Eight dollars a week for the first four months, then a raise to ten, and four months after that I'd get fifteen dollars a week. Did I take it? I would consider it. What did they say? There were too many after the job and, although they were very sorry, they couldn't wait. The next place was an automobile joint. The answer was that there might be something doing, but not at the present time. Then I hit a wholesale grocery store. 'Ever

have any experience?' No. 'We only want experienced men.' And so it went for twenty-four places and the highest bidder for my services was the sewing place. Can you beat it?"

Hicks smiled in a superior sort of way and resorted to that overused expression: "I told you so." Then he went on to elucidate: "I had a corking day—two pockets to the tune of forty-one dollars and nineteen cents."

O'Conner pressed his lips firmly together and, save to make a grimace, did not evince further the inner struggle that was usurping him.

The second day proved to be no different than the first so far as O'Conner was concerned. His quest for a decent job proved utterly fruitless. And so, because of that, on the third day he was a caller upon Neill.

"What luck?" queried the chief.

"Great luck," answered Con sneeringly. "I had an offer at eight dollars per—enough for drinks and tobacco for an ordinary man, but as I don't drink I could give the difference to charity."

The hint of a smile crossed Neill's features as he said: "And then they expect to reform men or keep them from going wrong by offering them a mere pittance for valuable time and more valuable labor, both mental and physical. Reform them," he snorted; "why, man alive! they're making men less efficient and less reliable instead. And they're filling our penal institutions and overcrowding our in-

sane asylums, besides nourishing bitterness and even anarchy right here in our own land—at our very doorsteps. Well, it's not my funeral, but mark my word that some day in the very near future there's going to be a revolution that will make any I. W. W. riot out on the Coast look like a session of the Afternoon Tattin' Club."

"You don't mean to tell me that you are a Socialist?"

"Not the way you think. But let me tell you that if I'd have my way about it I'd jail the man from whom the thief stole along with the thief. But, as it is, what can we do; we of the law who are here to prevent crime if we can, and if we can't to apprehend the criminal? Nothing, absolutely nothing but allow the truth to be glossed over because society demands a certain veneer as a shield of protection. Of course, we know that it's wrong to steal and we know that economic conditions are wrong, but if we'd so much as open our traps we'd get the G. B. quicker'n we could wink."

Con arose. He had his own peculiar views on the subject, but at the moment was in no mood to advance his arguments, and so, reaching for his hat on the desk, he promised: "I'll let you hear from me in a day or so." And departed.

O'Conner always kept his promise when it was possible to do so and therefore Neill heard from him the next afternoon. But the information that came over the telephone wire was not to the latter's

liking, for when Con said: "It's no use, Colonel, I can't make it a go," Neill knew that he and his force would be at wits' end to land O'Conner should he decide to stay in town.

. . . . . .

Monday morning at seven o'clock James O'Conner and Bud Hicks were eating breakfast in the cafeteria adjacent to the Salvation Army Citadel. O'Conner faced the door and presently he arose with sudden alacrity and, while reaching for his overcoat and hat, he whispered to Bud: "There he goes!"

Bud was on his feet in a minute and the two men hastily departed. As they passed the cashier's desk, Bud threw down a silver dollar and, although the two breakfasts did not total more than sixty cents, he did not wait for his change.

The two men trailed their quarry for a block and a half, then, just before an alley was reached, they closed in on him.

"Good morning, Santa Claus, and up this alley without a whimper. Sabe?" commanded Con, at the same time letting the astonished man feel the metallic press and hear the menacing trigger-click of the revolver that he held in his overcoat pocket.

"What do you want?" asked Santa Claus as he obeyed without so much as a hint of resistance. And said in a weak voice: "I haven't any money."

"We know that," answered Con, "and we're not going to harm you as long as you play this game by the rules that we set down. A little inconven-

ience, dear Brother, a little inconvenience, but you'll be none the worse tomorrow for your experience."

Midway up the alley the three entered a doorway and up one flight of steps they climbed, then entered a rather spacious and extremely comfortably furnished room.

"That rear entrance sure is some class," stated Bud with a happy little laugh once the door was locked from the inside," and the best part of it is that none of Neill's men have been able to get a line on my roost."

Con was too busy sizing up the necessary victim to their scheme to give Bud much attention, and so when he did speak it was on a different matter. Said he: "Bud, you're too tall. Didn't I tell you that he was just about my size?" Then, directing his attention to the wondering and now-frightened Santa Claus, he ordered, not unkindly: "Now, Brother, if you'll just take off that makeup, we'll not bother you any more."

Santa Claus, without hesitation, proceeded to divest himself of his red and white raiment, knowing full well that unless he showed a willingness to comply with this request, there would be trouble and that the only sufferer would be himself. So, as he removed first his hat, then his coat, next his trousers and finally the cotton beard, Con purloined and donned the apparel. This took some time to accomplish, but when, with Bud's aid, he had finally succeeded in rigging himself in the outfit to estab-

lish a presentable appearance, he went over to a dresser and from a drawer extracted a roll of cotton and an actor's makeup tin, then deftly applied the colored cosmetics to his face until he was almost the counterpart of what the original Santa Claus has been.

Bud now retreated to the opposite side of the room and, from a distance, complimented his pal upon his appearance, then queried: "Have you got enough cold cream with you? You know it's not easy to get off and we don't want any slip-ups."

"You bet I have," answered Con, then reminded: "And don't forget that we make that train at midnight. You bring the suitcases. I'll be there on time if I have to kill the whole of Neill's force, although I don't think any of them will be wise to me. But in case something does happen, you go on and I'll meet you later."

Con was about to take his departure when a half-inarticulate cry from Bud halted him and, turning back, he beheld the latter approach him with an iron pot and a tripod which the real Santa Claus had carried. It required but a minute to possess himself of these accoutrements, and the next minute he was walking boldly out the front door.

It was not a long distance to O'Conner's destination, the very busiest corner of the retail shopping district, and as soon as he arrived here he set the tripod and put the pot in proper position, with its display, "KEEP THE POT BOILING," conspicu-

ously to the front. And imitating the actions of a real Salvation Santa Claus, he jingled a small dinner bell almost continuously while pacing a short distance in either direction from his pot.

Meanwhile, back in the room Bud made escape almost impossible for the imprisoned man by securing him expertly to the heavy bedpost with a stout rope.

"Sorry to have to do this, Old Chap," half apologized Bud, "but you see I don't know your strength test and I'm not overly anxious to match up with you, either. Smoke? Certainly you do, even if it is against your religion. Here, have one of these," he invited, offering a box of good cigars; then as the man shook his head, he stated with a shrug of his shoulders: "You ought to, because it puts pep into a guy. Well, when you want a drink of water, don't mind to open your mouth to shout for it. That'll be about all except that lunch will be served at twelve o'clock and dinner about seven. So you see you're doomed to spend the day here, although you'll find that I'm very companionable and the time oughtn't to hang heavy. I'll tell you what we'll do. After a while we'll swap stories and it doesn't matter how many lies we tell each other, just so we don't make them too strong."

The Salvationist's eyes lighted and, in a voice that would have done credit to any clergyman preaching from the pulpit, he said: "Indeed, I shall be glad of the opportunity to tell you a story, and

I promise you that it will be the truth and nothing but the truth."

"Then it won't be a story and perhaps won't listen good, but I'll let you have a try at it anyway. What's it going to be about?"

"It's going to be about our Lord Jesus Christ and how he died to save men just like you."

"Well, when I get tired telling you tales, I'll let you have the floor, but I warn you beforehand that it's going to be mighty dull hearing."

"Perhaps it will—but it may do more good than you or I have any idea, and all that I can say is that when I give you the message of Him who was crucified, you will derive some benefit from it."

At noon O'Conner had quite a collection of money and it was with reluctance that he turned over his corner to a relief. But he had figured on doing this, for with a man of the intelligence that he possessed, not even the slightest detail was neglected in the original planning out of any "job." Therefore, by clever manipulation, he was enabled to return to his original standing place along about three o'clock and he was overjoyed to find that because of preparations being made in the Citadel for the Christmas dinner, no collector would make the rounds and that each man would turn in his pot at the Citadel, unopened at the end of the day.

CHAPTER V

JUST BOLDNESS

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Paul "Slick" Jeffries, Sergeant of Detectives, and William Knight, Inspector of Police, the latter in plain clothes, and both of whom were considered to be the best brains in the entire department, stood at the busiest corner of the shopping district to rest for a few moments from their arduous duties.

"What I'd like to know is the sort of a game O'Conner is going to rush through. Here we have all the boys out for him with orders to nab him on sight and not a sign or clue of him have we had," remarked Jeffries.

"It's a pity that Neill didn't have sense enough to detain him when he blew in," growled Knight. "That bluff of being decent was nothing but a gag of his and Neill fell for it like a hungry dog goes for a piece of fresh meat."

"I'm dead sure he's here, within as easy reach of me as this here Santa Claus is," asserted Jeffries between his teeth, indicating the disguised O'Conner, "but the only drawback is that he is slicker than

we are. And that's the only time I lose my title—when I'm up against O'Conner."

O'Conner smiled to himself; he even snickered a bit as he thought how he was succeeding. With him the greatest zest was in matching wits with the minions of the law and of eluding them as was at present the case. If Jeffries could only have known how fine a truth he had just uttered! "I'm dead sure he's here, within as easy reach of me as this here Santa Claus is." When he had uttered this phrase Con had been on the alert, had watched for the hand that would grasp his sleeve just below the elbow and which grasp would mean that Jeffries knew what he was talking about. O'Conner had been ready to make a dash for liberty, but the hand had not moved in his direction, and so he was aware that Jeffries' speech had been merely a simile. And when the Sergeant and the Inspector had moved on up the street, Con had flung the words after them, but not loud enough for anyone to hear:

"You poor boobs! If you had only known. But as it is, this Chris Kingle is on the job till quitting time. Hm! twenty-five to thirty dollars an hour isn't as bad as it sounds. And with every jangle in this pot my estimation and my love for humanity increases from a jitney up correspondingly."

Half an hour later Jeffries and Knight passed him again, and still later three or four other plain clothes men whom he knew, but none of them so much as had an inkling that the man they sought was within

arm's length. And, too, both the traffic officers at this corner would call over to him from time to time some inanity or a query as to the volume of business. It was the day before Christmas and the spirit of brotherhood, if lacking the other three hundred and sixty-three days in the year, is always a paramount factor on Christmas Day and its predecessor.

The little clock back in Bud Hicks' room indicated that it was seven o'clock and forthwith Bud untied his prisoner, the Salvationist, however, keeping an automatic revolver trained on the man. While he took a seat at a table well laden with food he instructed the other to sit opposite him. Then, when this had been accomplished, he placed the revolver on the table within easy reach of his own hand, but entirely out of the bounds of acquisition by the other. The afternoon had not dragged, due principally to the entertaining manner with which Bud had recited for the other's benefit tales of experiences in the life he led, and after a while the Salvationist had confided in Bud the story of his life. And, considering all things, the two in a way were quite friendly, although Bud, not trusting his prisoner, kept him under strict surveillance.

Between the hours of six and seven the crowds in the big city and in the downtown districts seem to desert the streets and so, even on Christmas Eve, as this city was no exception to the general rule, Con realized that the time for action had arrived.

It was five minutes to seven when he, with a yawn and a sigh of relief, lifted the pot which he had guarded almost all day and, folding the tripod, he proceeded to a dark spot where, with a pair of nippers, he cut the wire which latticed the top of the alms receptacle and extracted the contents. Then he counted—two hundred and ninety-seven dollars in amounts ranging from five-cent pieces to two-dollar greenbacks. Nor could he suppress the smile of delight that resulted from his appraisal of the result of this "job." Of course, it was small in comparison to what ordinarily he would consider a good day, but he was absolutely without funds and his indebtedness to Hicks was not at all to his liking. Now, with his share of the receipts of the day, he could reimburse Hicks for his generosity and still have sufficient to tide him over until he and Hicks could put through a real deal.

This little coup had been O'Conner's idea, and while Hicks had ridiculed it, Con had gone about perfecting plans. And it was only after Con had noted his desire to reimburse his pal that the latter consented to become a brother in this crime.

It is strange to take cognizance of the workings of the minds of individuals and the philosophy with which each views life. Here was Con stealing from one to pay another. Also, here was Hicks, who did not need the money he had so magnanimously loaned O'Conner, aiding in the theft. This principle, when differently applied, can cover almost every business

deal that was ever made, but as such, is catalogued superior shrewdness. Thus, the present cry of the Socialist, while a long way from Utopia and not laid down along consistent lines, will in time be revolutionized so as to make it the standard of the world.

This money Con now deftly emptied into a leathern money pouch which he wore fastened to a belt. Then, with the tripod under one arm and the pot in his hand, he entered a nearby store that was open. Here he asked permission to leave his outfit until the morning, when he would call for it, because it would be dangerous for him to carry an empty pot and a tripod in any direction save that which led to the Salvation Army Citadel. This he did not confide to the clerk, but that individual being a slow thinker did not bother himself as to the reason for Con's actions and directed Con to the back of the store.

For his own protection, O'Conner did not remove his Santa Claus disguise for he was aware that there would be time enough for that when he was once free of the downtown section of the city. So, with a boldness that removed all suspicion, he hastened up the street and had traversed perhaps a dozen blocks when the singing voices of children reached his ears. And as he came nearer the words became more distinct and he recognized them as those of a Christmas carol that once, long, long ago, when he was an urchin running bare-footed through

the tenement districts of the city and learning more of the vices than of the virtues of life, his mother had taught him. But then the meaning of the song had left no impression on him and his mother had not taken the time to explain them.

Now he stopped outside the church from whence the singing came to listen a while longer, why he could never explain even to himself save to say later, when he was in an unpleasant frame of mind, that Fate had had a grudge against him. And then something happened—for a voice, soft and low and pleasantly musical and quite close to him, exclaimed:

"Ah, a Santa gone astray!"

O'Conner looked around to behold a young girl of not more than nineteen summers smiling at him from beneath a most becoming hat. For the moment he was nonplussed because women and girls did not enter into his life unless it was the kind whom he could easily wield. But this girl was different, he knew instinctively and at once. He surmised that she was the daughter of some wealthy citizen, as he judged from clothes only and that, therefore, she was well protected from the coarseness of the life in which he lived.

Something tied his tongue, a look in her eyes it may have been or the quality of her voice, he never knew which, and before he could even think for consistent movement the sweet voice again said:

"If you are waiting for your automobile, Santa Claus, as most modern ones do, perhaps you would

like to step inside where it isn't quite so cold." Her voice was ripe with cordiality.

Con fumbled for a plausible excuse, but ere one presented itself to him the girl slipped her arm confidently through his and, with a slight tug, urged him on and to enter. Self-willed as he ever was and never influenced by any sentiment whatsoever, he was surprised that for the first time in his life to his knowledge he could not resist a plea. So, without any more thought of the future, he allowed himself to be led whither the girl would take him.

CHAPTER VI

HOPES

In every man there is the possibility of greatness, but the probability is such a rarity that in his hour it sets him aloof. Now, as O'Conner took his seat in a rear pew and, as if with one single glance, estimated the congregation, a certain subconsciousness told him that the first of his hours of greatness was near at hand, although of what fabric was to him still an enigma.

The first glance about him had sent a spasm of disgust over him as he beheld the cosmopolitan appearance of it, an impression that reminded him of the stories anent war prisoners which he had read in the newspapers, for here before his very eyes sat in amiability Germans, Italians, Hungarians, Russians, Swedes and not a few Americans. But this feeling was soon dispelled by the soft chatter of the children, all for the occasion, scrubbed to a shining cleanliness and with their only best raiment gracing their bodies. They and they alone now held his attention, and especially those who occupied the front dozen pews.

O'Conner's curiosity, never dormant yet always latent, was one of the reasons for the fact that he decided to remain. Yet this was not the paramount reason by any means, for, as the truth will out sooner or later, O'Conner had come under the spell of a young girl and, although he knew without being told that there was not the hope of even a friendship with this to him bewitching creature, he still retained a desire to hear, ere he left her forever, the sound of her sweet voice and to once again feel the touch of her hand. The big clock at the right side of the pulpit indicated that it was a few minutes to the hour of eight and as he was not due to catch the train whereon he would meet Bud Hicks until midnight, and as he could cover the distance from the church to the train in less than half an hour, he saw no reason why he should hurry; moreover, this place was the safest harbor possible, for it was likely that within an hour the Salvationists would miss a Santa Claus and report the loss to the police. Of course, this was problematical, yet it was always better to be overly cautious than the least bit bold.

Ever and anon O'Conner would catch a glimpse of the young girl, flitting here and there, whispering something to an old man, complimenting a mother anent the appearance of her child or petting the child itself. Then suddenly a hush fell over the place and an organist commenced to play the opening bars of a Christmas carol, one unfamiliar to

Con. And presently there arose on the air again the voices of children singing. Con listened with rapt attention and, as hardened as he was, he found it difficult to restrain tears from entering his eyes. At last the song ended and the organist, with a flourish, played the final few bars. A momentary lull ensued and then a man, who was heralded as Oscar Baxter, Superintendent of the Sunday School, mounted to a small, improvised stage to the left of the altar and conducted a short reading from the Scriptures.

" 'And a little child shall lead them,' " said the voice of the Superintendent, but as the words reached O'Conner's ears they said:

"And a bewitching girl shall lead him."

O'Conner was far from the term of sentimentalist and so with a straightening of his figure he, under his breath, muttered to himself: "Cut the sob stuff, Con, or else you'll be getting religion and then the Lord only knows what will happen to you."

Following the Scriptural reading, the Superintendent announced that a few of the more talented of the children would present a Christmas playlet entitled, "A Child's Christmas Dream." And even before he had retreated two steps, curtains descended to hide the stage. Yet scarcely a minute later they were drawn back again to reveal the setting.

There before one's eyes was the snuggest and coziest of bedrooms, with a fireplace in which glowed

illusioning red lights. From the chimney place there dangled two small stockings and before a bed, making a most appealing tableau, knelt two children in prayerful attitude at their mother's feet, while the lamp, which was set upon a table some distance away, burned with a low, yet mellow, glimmer.

O'Conner was deeply touched, for he had not seen such a picture of home life in years—in fact, he doubted whether such a scene upon which he now gazed were a possibility.

The children finished their prayers with the words:

"Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep; if I should die before I wake, I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take."

As well known as the words are to nine-tenths of the inhabitants of this country, they were new to Con, and he repeated them, almost mechanically, it seemed, after the children. Yet he had no time to soliloquize, for there was acting upon the stage that claimed his attention; he beheld the mother tuck both children between the covers and kiss them fondly, then leave the room.

Children will be children, and no sooner had the mother closed the door than there was a ferocious battle of pillows between the little ones, and it would have gone on indefinitely had not the entrance of a Santa Claus, emerging from the fireplace, interrupted it. Con knew that the dream was on.

The little ones frantically sought refuge under

the covers, but Santa, in a kindly voice bade them arise; and after they had obeyed and he had placed one on each knee, he said:

"Children, do you believe in God?"

There was a pause and then in chorus the two children lisped: "Indeed, good Santa Claus, we do believe in God."

"And why do you believe in God?"

"Because he is good and powerful and because he made the world and you and us."

"And do you believe in me?"

"Indeed we do, dear Santa Claus."

"And why do you believe in me?"

"Because you are the messenger of our Lord Jesus Christ and He sends you to us once each year so that everyone will be happy on His birthday."

"And is that all?"

"Oh, no, sir; but because He would lead sinners to Him so that He can show them the right way to live."

"Well, if you were Santa Claus, what would you do?"

"We would give to those who need."

"And do you know many people who are worthy and who really need?"

The two children slipped down from Santa Claus' knees and, going over to the table, picked up two pieces of paper, then, returning almost immediately to the seats they had just vacated, simultaneously they handed the pieces of paper to the Kris Kingle

and explained: "We have here a list of those who would give to those that need."

Santa Claus took the pieces of paper and, after placing the two children in bed, read therefrom: "'The bakers.'"

Immediately there was a stir among those in the front pews and four little children dressed as bakers and with large baskets filled with loaves of bread, which they could scarcely carry, advanced to the stage and placed their baskets thereon.

"'The grocers',' read Santa.

There was another stir in the audience and some twenty-five children advanced, each carrying a basket filled with groceries.

And so Santa read down the list and the provisions kept piling upon the stage until it resembled a well stocked provision market. Then a scowl settled upon Santa's countenance and he said:

"This is not enough, because I have only enough food here to fill two hundred and seventeen baskets and I have one hundred and fifty more whom I know need. So, to-morrow, on the Lord's birth anniversary, there will be one hundred and fifty families disappointed. It seems a shame, but we cannot help it, for each one of these baskets represents one dollar and there were only two hundred and seventeen dollars contributed."

O'Conner, sitting in a rear pew, had been deeply impressed by the performance and the benevolent spirit it represented, and a sudden inspiration came

to him. So acting quickly, on the spur of the moment and impulsively, as it were, he surreptitiously counted out fifty dollars from the amount which he had taken from the Salvation Army alms receptacle and which now reposed in a pouch in his belt. This he thrust into his pocket.

There was a sudden movement on Con's part and the congregation beheld a second Santa Claus make his way to the front and mount to the stage where, turning to the two children and in a voice which quavered with nervousness, say:

"Children, when you gave your list to Santa Claus, he said you gave him not enough and that there was not enough to go around in the way of baskets, but Santa Claus forgot that he had a twin brother upon whom he could call for the difference. So," he continued, opening his coat and bringing forth to view the leathern pouch, "the contents of this pouch will buy sufficient provisions to fill two hundred and forty-seven baskets."

Silence greeted this announcement, for the good news had come like a flash of sunshine from a cloudy sky, but as Con left the stage there was a burst of applause and such enthusiasm as had never been recorded within the portals of this place of worship.

Con immediately made his way to the door, for he knew that there would be inquiries as to his identity and this was the last thing which he could afford. And he was about to pass out into the en-

trance vestibule when a detaining hand was laid on his arm and a voice, the same that had bade him enter, inquired:

"Who are you, good Santa?"

Con turned to look again into the sparkling eyes and at the flushed cheeks of his sponsor. For a moment he hesitated; then, in a voice that was husky with emotion, he answered: "I am the believer of real charity. I take from the rich and give to the poor. I am the true personification of Santa Claus."

"But your real name—your everyday name. What is that?" persisted the girl, still allowing her arm to rest on his.

Con hesitated.

"Won't you please tell me who you are?" pleaded the girl. "You see it is so rarely one meets real benevolence that one is loath to remain ignorant of his identity."

Again Con hesitated, but straightening up and wincing he said: "Yes, I will tell you who I am, but only on one condition, that to these people here to-night you will never connect their anonymous Santa Claus with me. And when in to-morrow's papers you read the name O'Conner—James O'Conner—and what they say of me, please do not think too harshly of me, but remember that I, too, gave to the poor. Now, won't you tell me your name? You see, I'd like to remember you because—" His voice trailed off weakly and then died.

The girl was mystified, but seeing that Con would say no more she told him very simply: "I am Odette Simpson, Mr. O'Conner, and you'll not forget me, will you, because I'm very happy indeed to have known you." She extended her hand, but Con, pretending to ignore it, promised:

"Yes, I will remember you because I have good reasons for doing so. And now, as I must be off—good-by!"

"Oh, Mr. O'Conner—oh, wait a minute, please—Mr. O'Conner!" the girl called.

But Con had vanished, had been swallowed up in the darkness of an alleyway. And when he emerged from the alley a few minutes later he was no longer a Santa Claus.

. . . . . .

The next morning in the diner of a train speeding westward, James O'Conner and Bud Hicks looked out upon the snow fields and Con, leaning over to Bud, whispered:

"Some difference from my last train ride."

Bud's mind was on another matter and he evinced this by asking in an undertone: "How much did we net on the S. A. deal?"

"In reality," answered Con, "two hundred and ninety-seven dollars, but—well, I gave all but fifty to the poor. And it's the best thing we ever contributed to in our lives." And forthwith he recited in detail the incidents of his evening's experience.

Bud frowned, not an ugly scowl, but a thoughtful one, yet Con, misinterpreting this, said:

"And if you think I'm lying, why just you write to Miss Odette Simpson. She knows."

Bud smiled and said: "I believe you, Old Pal, and I'm glad you did it. You see, we two don't lie to each other—and anyway not on a day like this. Merry Christmas, Con!"

CHAPTER VII

ODETTE SIMPSON

Silas Simpson, the father of Odette, was a self-made man who had risen, after a bitter struggle and years of unceasing toil, to the realms of the Rich. But, contrary to the majority of precedents, and because of the lack of all proper sentimentality and perhaps the right perspective of life, he had no sympathy for those who are forced to live in the life from which he had emerged, battle-scarred yet triumphant. To be explicit, Silas Simpson contended that every man has an equal chance, and that if he does not get his share of the world's best, it is his fault and not due to any extenuating circumstances.

Simpson had been within one rung of the goal of his ambition, that of having an income exceeding one hundred thousand dollars per annum, when he had met Odette's mother, the only daughter of a middle-class clergyman. Mrs. Simpson had been well educated in so far as the academics were concerned, but neither she nor her father being worldly wise, it was an easy matter for Silas to add this

very pretty miss to his, as he unflatteringly termed it, "trophies." Oddly enough the two lived congenially and the result was a daughter.

Odette had inherited all of her mother's virtuous qualities, slightly intensified, and the best side of her father's qualities. After a thorough schooling, a brilliant future in the social world had been planned for her, but Odette's strong will asserted itself in the fact that she rebelled. Consequently there had been a split between father and daughter, shortly after the mother's death, and Odette, with a sufficient monthly income settled upon her to meet all the demands of the life to which she had been accustomed, had taken an apartment in the tenement district where she intended to devote most of her time to real settlement work.

Now, in her room, Odette Simpson arose earlier than usual on this Christmas morning and hastily sought the paper at the front door and, with a little sigh, turned the pages, hunting for the name O'Conner. But she saw it not. And she was about to lay it down when there, on the first page, she read the two-column headlined article:

SALVATION ARMY VICTIM OF CLEVER CROOK DRAG-NET OUT. THIEF SOUGHT

The article went on to state the story of a Salvation Army Santa Claus and detailed his experience. He gave a good description of the two men and from this the police knew immediately that they an-

swered to the names of James O'Conner and Bud Hicks. Underneath this there appeared the records of the two men that had been filed to date in the annals of the police. Also, there was a reward of three hundred dollars offered for any information that would lead to the apprehension of the two criminals.

Odette gasped as the full significance of O'Conner's past life dawned upon her. At first she was disgusted and even shuddered at the thought that she had touched the hand of such a man. To date, Odette's work had been among the poor only; she had not had one case where her influence was needed to regenerate those who had fallen prey to evil ways. In truth, she had not figured on this phase of a social worker's duty, and so it was small wonder that her feeling should be one of repugnance.

What should she do? Should she attempt to marshal O'Conner into the realms of decency? Or should she forget him? These thoughts came to her as she ate her solitary breakfast. Then, out of the whirlpool there arose two determinations, one of which must be cast off. But which one? To Odette that was the mind-disturbing problem. She wondered was she so mentally constructed that her individuality must needs dominate O'Conner's or whether O'Conner's strength of character, now so wrongly applied, would, without friction, be subservient to her earnest efforts. It was possible that O'Conner's nature was characteristically so unsym-

pathetic that in his dealings with her he would scoff at her as an interfering and wholly unpleasant person.

She must decide herself what to do; that much was certain. Nor could she procrastinate. Therefore, by the time she had finished breakfast she had mapped out her plan of action in regard to her conduct of approaching O'Conner. So, with this ultimate end in view, she directed her first steps toward the police headquarters.

When Odette's card was brought to Neill, he frowned, for while he knew of her and her work, he did not relish the idea of women, other than his stool-pigeons, taking a hand in any case. And he knew that unless such was the girl's intention, she would not be a visitor to his office. However, he decided that he would listen to her and in the event that his surmise of her visit was correct, would argue her out of her determination.

"I've heard of you and of your good work, Miss Simpson—and I know your father," was Neill's greeting as he offered her a chair. "What can I do for you?"

Odette dimpled prettily and answered: "I don't know what you can do for me—maybe nothing at all and perhaps you can aid me very much."

Neill smiled. His surmise had been correct. This girl was about to interfere in some case where evidently either a man or a woman whom she had taken under her wing had transgressed the law.

And he was ready to overlook any offense, providing it was not of too great a magnitude, and to yield to Odette's entreaties in behalf of her near-ward. So, with this object in view, he promised: "Anything that I can do for you, Miss Simpson, will give me pleasure. Has one of your fold gotten in trouble?"

"He is not one of my fold already, but I have the greatest hopes that he will be—and soon too."

"Then it is a man and not the mother of perhaps half a dozen children?"

"I see you're not taking me very seriously or else you have already decided to let me have my way," accused Odette.

Neill fairly shook with laughter and, when he had controlled himself sufficiently for speech, he said condescendingly, although he tried to be patronizing: "You're a bright little girl, Miss Simpson, and I'll tell you now that you got me first crack o' the whip."

Odette's expression remained serious as she asserted: "You do not know about whom I am speaking, and it may not be such a laughing matter to you after all. But as you've promised to yield to me and as I am going to hold you strictly to that promise, I'll—"

Neill laughed loudly again, saying: "I'll go downstairs with you now to the detention cells and I myself will hand over your man to you. But I'll hold you partly responsible for his future conduct."

"Then you have him in custody already? The paper said that you had out a drag-net for him."

Still not guessing of whom Odette was speaking, Neill answered: "When we put out our drag-net none escape."

"Then you caught him—and I may see Mr. O'Conner and take him under my wing?"

Had a bomb exploded beside Neill, as the old saying is, he could not have been more taken by surprise. But, schooled in the art of concealing his emotions, he asked in a matter-of-fact tone: "So it's O'Conner whom you have singled out?" Then, with a hint of grilling, he went on: "How did you ever hear of him?"

"I—I met him last night."

"The deuce you say!"

"And now I want to talk with him—I'm going to try to reform him and—"

"But you can't talk to him—now."

"Why can't I? You promised."

"Well, for the very simple reason that we can't find a trace of him—nor of his pal, Bud Hicks, though we've had all of our best men on their trail since shortly after midnight. If you can give us any information that will help us to capture him, I'll let you do all the reforming you want and won't interfere with your method except that I must insist that we keep him behind bars until his reformation, if it is at all possible, is a sure thing."

"I wish I could help you, not to land him in a

cell, but so that I might start my work on him. From what I have garnered of his innermost traits, I think that he can be made into a most sterling specimen of manhood."

"Then how did it happen that you met him?"

Odette at once fell into a recital of the episode at the church and finished with: "And so you see that he is at least human and has a soul. And any soul is worth saving."

Neill shook his head negatively and in the way of all police evinced his distrust of any act or word of a known crook by the observation: "Now, Miss Simpson, I have heard your side and it sounds plausible enough—but that is when you don't know the man, yet from my experiences, and they have been many, I have found that there is always a method, nine times out of ten, maybe ten times out of ten, underhanded in everything they do. You know you have done splendid work along the lines you have followed and, while I'm not dictating to you and you may do as you like, for I intend to stick to my promise when we do get our hands on O'Conner, if I were you I wouldn't forge ahead on anything else—in other words, I wouldn't tackle O'Conner, for he's beyond even the hope of coming to himself."

"How do you know there is no hope for him? How do you know that with the proper influence he would not make a good citizen?"

"Miss Simpson, we police never make an assertion

that is not based on something. In this case we've given your man a pretty fair trial and it's no use."

Odette was silent for some few minutes, then rising, preparatory to departure, she took out a card from her case and, writing thereon her address, handed this to Neill with the request: "When you do get this man, you'll let me know, won't you? And —and thank you for giving me this time and consideration."

Neill arose also and while escorting Odette to the door he assured her: "I'll let you know, Miss Simpson, but you'll have a hard job on your hands and, as I said before, I don't think you'll be very successful."

"We'll see," were Odette's parting words.

CHAPTER VIII

DR. FLEMING IS INTRODUCED

O'Conner and Bud Hicks immediately they quitted the dining car made their way to the observation car at the rear. There were many things to be discussed, principally their destination and the outlook for their future.

"Well, Con, what's your idea?" Hicks thus consulted his pal.

"I suggest that we ride on to the next big town and return."

"But that would be suicide. You know that Neill has his drag-net out and we wouldn't be there half an hour before they'd get us."

"Oh, I'm not going crazy, as you think. Now, just you leave it to me and we'll make a good haul besides."

"Very well, but I'm rather leery of this putting our necks in the noose."

"There's nothing to it, for once I explain my idea to you, you'll say it's the best you've ever heard. And I'll be responsible for everything."

"But why not get out at some small burg and—"

"Some feather-brain, you are, to be sure," Con interrupted, though without a sting. "Don't you know that if we land in any By Heck Burg the village constable, having received a message from Neill to be on the lookout, will spot us and march us up to the town lock-up. We'd be as conspicuous in any Rubenville as the President of the United States is in Oshkosh."

"You're right, Con, and from now on I'll leave everything in your hands."

And so it was that when the next big town was reached, which incidentally happened to have about as many inhabitants as the one they had just left, O'Conner left Bud near the gate to the trains while he went inside the depot proper. Five minutes later he rejoined Bud and, seeing the look of inquiry which Bud cast toward him, he satisfied that curiosity by handing over a telegram with the assertion: "I sent that."

Bud, perusing the message, smiled and at the same time complimented his pal by saying: "I have to hand it to you, Con, for having some nob."

"I knew you'd say it was a good idea and—Hurry up now for our train leaves in ten minutes."

And back in Neill's office he read a telegram which informed him that Bud Hicks and James O'Conner were leaving his precincts forever and wished him happiness for the remainder of his natural life.

. . . . . .

Neill, Jeffries and Knight were in earnest serious conference in the former's office.

"It's got my goat," snapped Jeffries, using the vernacular and banging the table with his large fist in order to emphasize his statement and his feelings as well. "Six hauls in a month and every one of my men and your men working like beavers. Who is putting this jinx on us, I'd like to know. It's unbelievable—sort o' uncannylike because all we get are clues that lead to nowhere in particular. And take it from me, these jobs are the work of one crowd. But who are they? Who I ask? Newcomers couldn't keep the pace and get away with it, I tell you, not alone to make a continuous performance. Every last one of those jobs is the work of professionals. And if you want to know the truth, I'm up in the air, I am."

"It does look as though we're up against it," admitted Neill, reluctantly and, it is true, somewhat dolefully, the while he stroked his graying hair. "That drag-net of ours was like a porous paper sieve. The fact of the matter is, I'm willing—almost—to lay down; that is, for a time at least."

"There's one thing I noticed in checking up those jobs and that was that each and every one of them bore marks of similarity—and to me they smack of O'Conner and Hicks," advanced Knight, frowning most unpleasantly.

The other two nodded their heads affirmatively, then Jeffries verbally doubted:

"Yes, it might be, but it isn't very probable. Con and Hicks are wanted here for that Salvation Army pull-off the day before Christmas and they know we want them, so it's not likely that they'll show their faces inside the boundary limits of this State for some time to come. And anyway, we've got to give the devils their dues and shake the idea of O'Conner and Hicks being guilty."

"As far as I'm concerned, I'm inclined to the belief that it's the work of foreigners," opined Neill wearily. "I'm not so cock-sure either that there's not a woman being used, either as an accomplice, a sort of blind or as a co-worker. It's just as Jeffries said a few minutes ago: we get plenty of clues that lead us to a certain point and then dwindle like an icicle does when you put it in a hot oven."

"Well, whoever they are—and it's not a lone-hand job—they are certainly having the big ha ha on us," asserted Jeffries in a voice which evinced that he did not relish the thought.

There was a limited season of silence which was broken by Knight, who inquired: "How about the swag? Any clues there?"

"About as many as there are flies at the North Pole in the dead of winter," answered Neill monotonously. "They haven't tried to get rid of even a brass tack—they're too wise for that. Of course they know, damn 'em, that we're watching all the fences and pawn-shops and—"

"It seems to me," Knight interrupted, "that if the

newspapers would quit their confounded howling and stop making fifty-seven varieties of hash out of this story in every issue, that we might get a look-in on something that seems like a tangible clue."

Jeffries, shaking his head, verbally disagreed: "Those crooks don't give a hang for what the newspapers say. And the more I think of it the more it appears to me that that woman clue is a fine bluff. Their game is too big for a woman to be dabbling in and— Why, so far, the amount of jewels stolen amounts to nearly two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the owners' estimation, but in actual value you could buy the whole smear for fifty thousand," Neill vouchsafed.

"How many private agencies on the case?" queried Knight, and needlessly explained: "I haven't been able to follow this as closely as I desired owing to that triple murder and those two conventions. You know, we didn't have one case of larceny recorded during the conventions. And that's what makes these jobs all the more heart-breaking for us, although it shows us that the crowd doesn't work in the open, else we'd have caught them long before this."

"Three agencies are working hand-in-hand with us," answered Neill, "and they get clues too—any number of them—but they fall down like a row of pins in a ten-strike. We're all working along two

lines now—one with a woman as one of the gang and the other with her eliminated."

"Well, whatever else it is, it's Hell for us," growled Jeffries. "Here we no sooner get rid of O'Conner and Hicks and think to have a few hours of home life, a pipe or two full of tobacco and a game with the kiddies than we run afowl a bar as clever as anyone ever put in our way. Of course, we have the consolation of knowing that it's a game of wits—and whether they hold out for another job or whether we get them before that, although in the long run, they'll be our quarry."

"But how long the run is going to be, the good Lord only knows," augmented Knight.

Neill now drifted from the subject by asserting: "Suppose we cut out these post-mortems, seeing they're not doing us any good, and get down to plans for action. Jeffries, who gives the next big social affair?"

Jeffries dug into a pocket of his coat and, extracting a note-book, consulted this, then read aloud: "Thomas Crane. The thirtieth of this month. Two hundred and fifty invitations."

"And to-day is the twenty-fifth," stated Neill, more to himself than to the others, then went on: "We've five days in which to set our best traps. Now, I have an idea that it will be better to tell the reporters that we've nabbed the thieves and are on the trail of the stolen property, but that for good reasons we're not yet ready to reveal the iden-

tity of our prisoners. That will cause the private agencies to call off their men—and for a day or so we'll call off all of our men, thus giving us a new and clear field for the Crane affair. And, besides, it will make the thieves bolder in their operations and our chances of a round-up a hundred per cent. better."

There was a knock on the door and the Police Secretary entered bearing a card which he handed to Neill.

" 'George Edward Fleming. Bromidrosis Specialist'," Neill read aloud, then his expression becoming perplexed he inquired: "Who knows what bromidrosis means?"

There was a general shaking of heads in the negative until Morgan, the Secretary, said, while reaching for the dictionary:

"I'll find out in a minute." And presently he read: " 'Bromidrosis. Diseases of the skin. The odor of the cuticle. Excretive perspiration.' "

There was a chorus of soft grunts and Neill instructed in martyrdom tones:

"Tell him to come in."

Morgan made his exit and a few seconds later ushered into the office a man of intelligent appearance, keen of eye, despite the pince-nez, powerful of build and of imposing bearing, and the three officials noted with approbation the six feet of living flesh and bones and muscles, while Neill cordially invited:

"Have a chair, Dr. Fleming."

Dr. Fleming ensconced himself easily in one of the many chairs placed in the office, after which with evident deliberation and carefulness, he placed his hat and gloves and walking stick on the table.

"Now, Doctor, what can we do for you?" asked Neill, and explained: "We don't often have a visitor who has not some kind of a complaint to register. I hope that yours is not a serious matter."

The physician smiled broadly, saying: "No complaint this time, gentlemen. I'm to be an exception, for my business here is of a different nature—it is to offer you my services, if you think them valuable, after you have heard in what capacity."

The three officials looked up quizzically and Neill, who acted as spokesman, requested: "In what connection, may I ask?" His voice had lost much of its initial cordiality.

Dr. Fleming, figuratively, did not beat about the bush, but said in the direct way habitual to him: "The recent jewel robberies. I don't think I overestimate my ability to say that I can catch the thieves for you."

The three officials were alert, although silent, while the expressions on each of the three faces underwent transitions from incredulity to serious thoughtfulness. Then, with his brows contracted in a deep frown, Neill said:

"If you can catch those thieves or that thief, the Department is willing to part with twenty-five

hundred dollars. Of course, I do not doubt but that you have some definite information that will lead you to this capture and—"

"I have absolutely no information," asserted Fleming with emphasis, then explained his interest: "You see I want to try an experiment, one which, if successful, will be in the future of invaluable assistance to the police in every civilized community. I do not wish you to misunderstand me to say that my theory will be always applicable, yet in seventy-five per cent. of cases it will work to the best advantage. Now, as to the remuneration, I shall take it and let it establish a fund for the promulgation of a College of Bromidrosis."

The three officials frowned in no uncertain manner, for none of them ever placed any faith in pseudo detectives, no matter what their social standing. However, Neill said:

"I do not see that there is anything or anyone to prevent you from entering the game, yet I must tell you that you cannot expect any material aid from the Department. We cannot and will not give you any clue or any information that we have so far unearthed; nevertheless, I will promise you that we'll work with you so far as we are able. Now, to show you our calibre, there is one secret that I shall impart to you. This afternoon the newspapers will publish stories to the effect that we have apprehended the thieves. That is not so. And the only persons who are aware that the thieves are still

roaming at large are Inspector Knight, Jeffries, you and myself. Consequently, we expect you to keep this fact confidential. If your plans necessitate publicity, though, I shall order you to keep your hands off."

Dr. Fleming nodded and assured: "I certainly shall not betray your confidence; moreover, the less publicity in the matter, so far as I am concerned, the better. Further, as I am quite a student in criminology, your little coup with the newspapers will make the thieves, at their next escapade of professionally purloining the property of others, so lacking in caution as to be almost imprudent. Am I not correct in my deductions?"

"Absolutely, absolutely," answered Neill, after which he fell into a protracted silence while the other two officials, to all intent, were considering Dr. Fleming's entrance into the case. And this silence was broken only when Fleming said:

"There is just one stipulation that I must insist upon before I take up the work and which I did not mention beforehand. In order to be successful I must work practically alone."

The three officials smiled blandly and with just a hint of amusement, while Jeffries demanded:

"You mean that you want us to recall our men from the case?"

Dr. Fleming ignored the lack of seriousness that his stipulation had met and reiterated: "Yes—I must work practically alone, but I desire to have

placed at my disposal one detective, the best man you have, subject to my orders. Any more would be a hindrance and only prolong the date of capture."

"What do you think, Chief?" asked Knight.

"I can't say off-hand," answered Neill, then turning to Fleming he inquired: "I suppose, Doctor, that if we let you know some time to-morrow it would be agreeable?"

"It will have to be," smiled Fleming, and added: "although the sooner I am at work on this case the better the chances for the success of my experiment. He arose and, shaking hands with the three men, took his departure.

Immediately Fleming had quitted the room there was another official conference.

"Jeffries, I think you had better look up this man's record—Fleming's," suggested Knight.

"So do I," agreed Neill. "We can't decide anything until we know that. He seems genuine enough to me, but it is better policy to know positively, because never before have appearances been so deceptive as they are nowadays. And for all we know he may be a confederate of this clever bunch of diamond-eaters. That they are men of more than ordinary mental ability is a certainty, and this may be but a method to temporarily stop our work on the case."

"I'm with you there, Chief," voiced Jeffries, "because the boldness of the request and its simplicity

should alone serve to put us on our guard. They know that we'd welcome aid, and as you say, this may only be a move to put us off their track."

"I don't agree with either of you," argued Knight, "for the very boldness and simplicity of the doctor's manner the thieves know would put us on our mettle. However, an investigation can do no harm."

The announcements in the afternoon papers of the capture of the jewel thieves made those members of the beau monde who had planned to attend the Crane affair sans the adornment of any jewelry, change their minds and replan to wear their treasures.

CHAPTER IX

FLEMING ACCEPTS AN OFFICE

It was four o'clock in the afternoon of the thirtieth when a summons arrived from Neill to Dr. Fleming that the latter's presence was desired at Police Headquarters. And when Fleming arrived Neill, Knight and Jeffries welcomed him.

"Doctor Fleming," began Neill, "having looked up your record since your last visit and on the strength of it we have decided to let you take charge of the jewel case on your own terms. I do not want you to feel—a—to be put out by the fact that we did look you up, and I shall tell you that we did so merely as a measure of necessary precaution in order to guard ourselves as well as the public. I trust you understand—and I do not doubt but that you do for, as a criminologist, you are aware that to-day there are so many species of dishonest men—call them burglars or thieves or get-rich-quick artists or whatever else you like—and that science has made such inroads into the possibilities of detecting a criminal that it is therefore as much as we can do to keep anywhere near a decent pace.

But understand that I am not condemning science, nor belittling the standard of the police either, but I must say that we must keep humping along, studying day and night the methods adopted by both the criminal and the law, not only to prevent crime, but to capture the wrong-doers as well. One of the greatest institutions in the country to-day is the Juvenile Court when it is properly conducted—it is of the greatest value to the police of the present and will make the work of the police in the future mere child's play in comparison, for upon the Juvenile Court devolves the business of preventing the youth of our land from becoming hardened criminals. This is by weeding out the root—formerly we could merely cut down the poisoned tree after maturity." He breathed a sigh of relief and prided himself upon this, as he thought, learned dissertation and the impression that undoubtedly he had made upon Fleming by such wordiness.

Fleming had followed Neill's discourse with serious intentness, so it seemed, and he said: "I thank you, gentlemen, for your decision to allow me the opportunity to give my experiment such a thorough, practical test—and I can only say that I am quite sure you will thank me in the near future. And before we go any further, I want to say that I have been deeply impressed with Colonel Neill's views, which I take to be the expression of those held by all police officials. Also, I agree with him upon the importance of the Juvenile Court in our

social evolution but—well, I'll be frank with you in saying that I do not agree with the other statements Colonel Neill made. And why? Because the one great fault with you police, disagreeable as it may be for you to hear, is that you do not keep pace with science to near the extent that the real criminals do. Just recently I had a talk with Eric Harlow, the attorney whom you all know, and he stated that after seventeen years of study and observations he has found there are very few dishonest people in the world, deducing his conclusions from the fact that he has gone into the human side of the question while you police merely gather the evidence from the surface. And Harlow contends in his summary that nine out of every ten persons who are convicted for dishonesty are the victims of circumstances over which they had not control. Of course, this diamond thief—or these thieves—are real criminals and never will be anything else, even though they live to pass the century mark. Thus we see that real criminals must be and are far more intelligent than the police, for the police cling to antiquated methods while the real criminal is ever alert for advancement. Now, Bertillion, who died recently, and whose system the police everywhere use, was no doubt the greatest enemy the criminal ever had, but the decade of Bertillion is passed and criminals to-day can defeat that system with the utmost ease."

"The Doctor is right," Jeffries asserted, "for it does not require any ingenuity to capture a low-brow criminal—and if the criminal world was composed of low-brows only, there would be no need for police, because the only requisite would be jails. Now, in my opinion there is—"

Jeffries was interrupted by Knight who reminded: "It's getting late, Jeffries, so suppose we get down to business. Now, Doctor, any and all information that we have bearing on the cases is at your disposal. Also, you may select any man on the force as your aide."

"I shan't need much information," Fleming explained, "but I do want the newest adjunct to the force—and the only use I shall have for him is at the time I make the arrest. One other thing. I read that the Thomas Cranes are giving an affair to-night and I suppose that you can arrange so that I may be in attendance."

There was a simultaneous affirmative nodding of three heads and Neill said: "That is a small detail. So I'll have you sworn in as a special officer. It will take but a few minutes. And I think you will find Alex Mangold, the aide to meet your requirements."

And Fleming, having been duly sworn in as a special police officer, Neill turned to him with the information:

"You are now ordered to take full and sole charge

of the business of capturing the jewel thieves."

"My only hope is that I shall be successful," said Fleming.

"And our prayers are with you," came a chorus of three in support.

CHAPTER X

AS IT WAS NOT INTENDED

The crowning event of the social season was the Crane Ball and therefore society, dressed exquisitely and bedecked and aglitter with thousands of dollars' worth of jewels, was in attendance en masse.

Four men who wove their paths in and out and among this fashionable crush were surreptitiously alert. One of these men was Dr. George Edward Fleming, immaculate in full dress evening attire; another was Alex Mangold, the doctor's aide, equally as immaculate in proper togs, but not near so much at ease, although he did not, by act or word, evince his discomfort. The other two men were guests who, with critical eyes, appraised at long range or closely, as opportunity presented, the costly diamonds of the feminine contingent, and calculated upon the market value of this necklace or that pendant; however, to the young men with diamond-imbedded cuff buttons and to the older ones who still clung to the diamond shirt stud, they gave but scant attention.

The evening was still young when Mrs. Crane, the hostess, advanced towards Fleming and sweetly petitioned: "Oh, Doctor Fleming, won't you dance this fox trot with me?"

Fleming bowed with all the gallantry of a Chevalier and answered: "Indeed, I shall certainly appreciate the honor, Mrs. Crane."

Mrs. Crane, as she leaned upon Fleming's arm, whispered to him with her voice inflecting her suspicions: "Doctor Fleming, I do not like the appearance of that man over there," indicating, with a nod of her head, Mangold. Then she continued in an apologetic tone: "Of course, you will pardon me for being so blunt but—but—"

"You need not worry about him," Fleming assured the hostess. "He's from Police Headquarters as an aide to me."

"Then you expect trouble? I thought that the police had captured the thieves."

Fleming, thinking it better not to alarm the woman, answered somewhat ambiguously: "So they have, Mrs. Crane."

Here the music ceased and Fleming led Mrs. Crane to a chair and, after a few words of pleasantries had been exchanged, left her. However, later in the evening Mrs. Crane approached Fleming hurriedly, the very personification of perturbation, and asked, a bit excitedly, it is true:

"Are you quite positive, Doctor Fleming, that the society jewelry thieves have been captured?"

Fleming scrutinized Mrs. Crane's countenance for a moment or so, then realizing that there was something amiss, but with only a latent interest, demanded: "Why do you ask? Has anything happened to make you doubt?"

The hostess hesitated, then haltingly answered: "Yes and no. Just now Mrs. Henry Allyn informed me that her diamond necklace which she values at twenty-five thousand dollars is missing—has disappeared. And oh, it is so discomforting to have one lose one's jewels in my house. I do so hope she finds it."

Fleming was equal to the emergency and he requested: "Will you please present me to Mrs. Allyn? Perhaps we can find the missing article without anyone being a bit the wiser."

Mrs. Crane complied with the request by calling to a beautiful young matron who was near at hand: "Oh, I say, Bertha Allyn, come over here, will you please?" And when Mrs. Allyn had crossed the intervening space she said: "I want you to meet Doctor Fleming. He may be able to help you."

Waltz music sounded and Fleming and Mrs. Allyn joined the rhythmical current while Fleming said: "Mrs. Crane has just confided to me that you have lost your necklace." Then dropping his voice to a mere whisper he continued: "I shall confide to you that I am connected with the Police Department as an experimental expert, so, if it has been stolen or lost, it is I who will be the one to restore it to you.

Now, how long ago has it been since you missed it?"

"Not more than fifteen minutes," answered the matron, almost on the verge of tears because of her loss.

"I suppose that you have danced considerable this evening?" Fleming next asked.

"Yes indeed—in fact, I have not missed one number."

"And can you recall who were your partners?"

"Why certainly—very easily. They were Mrs. Crane's son, Mr. Crane, Mr. Burkhart, and Mr. Wilkshire, that exceptional Englishman."

"And after whose dance did you miss your necklace?"

"Mr. Burkhart's."

Fleming had paid but little visual attention to Mrs. Allyn during his catechism, for his eyes had been roving here and there fleetingly, but now he gave his dancing partner his entire attention as he asked: "Can you recall any distinguishing feature about any of your dancing partners? I suppose that you have been acquainted with all of them for years."

"No, I wouldn't say all of them, for Mr. Wilkshire has just been in this country about four months and Mr. Burkhart, who is traveling with him, is from Montreal. You know Mr. Wilkshire is a special envoy of some sort for the British Government—I think his mission has something to do with the British

subjects in Mexico. He met young Crane at the Athletic Club and so was taken up immediately by our Four Hundred."

"I think I met Mr. Wilkshire earlier in the evening."

"Oh, did you? And did you notice that charming odor of violets when in his proximity?"

"I think I did."

"Well, we have endeavored to have him tell us what make powder or sachet or toilet water it is, because it is so distinctly different from any that we have known. But perhaps you are like the balance of the men and do not know that this season violets are taboo. Yet if we could have an odor similar to Mr. Wilkshire's we would revive it instantly. Perhaps you have not noticed either that there is not a woman here to-night who has the least hint of violets about her. But Mr. Wilkshire is horrid because he simply won't tell anyone." And Mrs. Allyn ended with a little moue.

Fleming now guided the way to one side of the room, very close to his aide, and ordered quietly, yet tersely: "The main door!"

Mangold understood and unobtrusively, yet hastily, gained the position just as the music ceased.

Fleming next brought up alongside of Wilkshire, whom he tapped upon the arm and requested: "Oh, Mr. Wilkshire, I'd like a word with you."

Wilkshire turned slowly to face Fleming, then with comet speed movements he took from his pocket a

revolver, with which weapon he instantly covered the room and at the same time, in a voice raised to a pitch that carried to the four corners he said:

"The first man to move—or woman—gets a bullet!" His accent was decidedly un-English.

Fleming, by the unexpected turn of affairs and, although he had an automatic revolver in his hip pocket, being too much of a novice when actually confronted with the real situation, was stumped as to how to act to the best advantage, so he, with the other men in the room, held his hands in the air obediently. Nevertheless, there were two men in that room who did not obey Wilkshire's command: one at the first hint of trouble had ducked behind a nest of ferns which was doing duty as a decoration: the other, Mangold, dropped quickly to the floor and silently crawled to within five feet of Fleming, unobserved by Wilkshire and, even before the latter realized what was happening, there was a sudden reversal of form, and Wilkshire was covered by Mangold's revolver.

"Throw that gun on the floor!" thundered Mangold.

Wilkshire started to do the bidding, but had just time enough to relax his arm when a command from the other side of the room immediately caused everyone to raise arms again perpendicular. The new command came from Burkhart, who warned:

"The first person who moves takes his life into the path of a bullet!" Then to Wilkshire he in-

structed: "Grab that gum-shoe's gun as I advance. I've got to keep these mollycoddles in line—merely for precaution."

Wilkshire, with the gun of Mangold in one hand and his own weapon in the other, slowly backed towards the door while Burkhart made a detour of the assemblage to join him, then when the two met they retreated swiftly from view.

"We better not try to make a run for it," whispered Burkhart as he and Wilkshire noiselessly ran along the hall. "Can't never tell how many crackers a bunch like that carries."

"Right-o. No chance to make a get-away for hours," panted Wilkshire. "And believe me that find of mine will stand us mighty handy now."

"Who knows about it?"

"No one. It's in the old part of the house—this part has been built only recently."

"Do you know the exact spot?" inquired Burkhart, a bit anxiously, it is true.

Wilkshire did not reply, but suddenly halted and, going over to the right wall, fumbled about the wainscoting, the while he imparted to his comrade: "This place must have been built in the pioneer days and was evidently used by the original owners as a hiding place from the Indians."

There was a muffled, clicking sound from the ballroom and just as a few of the braver men were heard coming down the hall, which Wilkshire had had sense enough to plunge into stygian darkness, he slid a

panel and, drawing Burkhart through the small aperture after him, quickly yet without any noise whatsoever, shoved the panel closed again. Inside there was sufficient room for at least fifteen people to stand upright. Air was supplied through a small opening in a brick wall that was not larger than a five-cent piece. Now there was not one ray of light therein.

From this hiding place the two men could hear the commotion in the hallway, windows and doors being banged open near and far. But above this there sounded the music of the orchestra in the ballroom. Then, from just outside the panel:

"Doctor, they've made good their get-away." By this the two men knew that Dr. Fleming was on the case, although in what connection puzzled them.

"Perhaps—this time, but it will be their last job in these precincts."

The two men in the alcove smiled, for to hear themselves discussed in such confident tones and to hear such a boast, appealed strongly to their sense of humor.

"Don't you think that I better call up Headquarters to put them wise?" inquired the first voice, thus giving the two men the knowledge that the owner was Mangold.

"No, I do not want any help. Headquarters would only bungle things for me," said Fleming; then in more severe tones: "As I understand, you are under my orders."

"Absolutely, Doctor, absolutely."

After that the hidees in the alcove individually surmised that Fleming and Mangold were moving away, for their words became indistinguishable and finally the sounds of their voices were no longer audible. Yet even so, they dared not move.

CHAPTER XI

THE BOOMERANG—AND BROMIDROSIS

George Edward Fleming, Bromidrosis Specialist, was phenomenally shrewd. Thus, while Wilkshire, figuratively, had held up the ball-room at the point of his revolver, the doctor had not been idle, for his supersensitive nostrils had been strongly assailed by a violet odor, distinguishable because of the presence of just the slightest taint of a sulphuric excretion that was a part of it. That alone had told him that the odor was natural and not, as the débutantes and matrons had supposed, sachet or cologne or powder. Therefore, he foresaw that his experiment would prove successful, not only in theory, but materially. To him Wilkshire was forever a branded individual.

Fleming had traced the odor to the panel, and although at that particular spot the odor remained, only an occasional whiff or two, Wilkshire had disappeared. But Fleming was sufficiently conversant with the medical subject of bromidrosis to know that only in the proximity of the individual so blessed or afflicted, whichever the case proved to be, could the

odor be detected; it never lingered. Therefore, he was positive that the Englishman was nearer than the others imagined.

As he walked away from the particular spot with Mangold, the particular odor of violets had been lost. Then and then only did he know that he would not be overheard. So, about fifty feet farther along he halted and, turning to his aide said: "Mangold, those two men are still in this house hiding. They haven't been able to escape yet. Now, I want you to go to the ball-room and ascertain how many of the men are armed and tell those that have revolvers to be ready if they are needed. Also, while you are there call up Jeffries—there's a telephone right beside the orchestra platform—and tell him that I think we'll need about thirty men up here; he's waiting in his office to hear from me. Tell him that it will be better to keep his men under cover. Now, as soon as you have attended to that, return to me here. Have you another revolver?"

"I always carry two guns for just such emergencies," answered the aide, then added: "I wish I could have made a target of Wilkshire—I'd have got a clear field if there'd not been so many in the way. I'm not new to the police business—I used to be a detective on the Philadelphia force, but my health went bad and the doctors ordered me out here—got me this job about a month ago." With which he moved swiftly along the hall to the ball-room to carry out instructions.

In five minutes Mangold rejoined Fleming and imparted: "Jeffries said he'd be here in less than ten minutes."

"Good!" exclaimed the physician, and immediately retraced his steps with Mangold following almost upon his heels. Fleming sniffed continuously, walking at a snail's pace, until he had traversed nearly fifty feet, then abruptly, that is as abruptly as such a case warrants, halted. For a moment or so he stood irresolute, then, putting his finger to his lips to caution his aide to be silent, he wrote on a piece of paper:

"Remain here until I give the signal to move. And keep your eyes open. Better stand away from the wall. The men are near here. I'm going to the ball-room for a few minutes."

A scant ten minutes later Jeffries entered the ball-room and immediately made his way to Fleming.

"What's wrong, Doctor?" he inquired.

"A diamond necklace has been stolen from one of the guests. The thieves are still here—and I wouldn't stake one hair of my head on their chances to escape. They have disappeared, but they haven't gone far—in fact, not out of this house."

Jeffries scowled darkly, saying: "And they won't get away then, for I've got the house and grounds alive with my men—no one can leave without detection."

"That's fine," Fleming complimented the sagacity of Jeffries' forethought, then informed him: "I'm

going to make an announcement now." And, addressing a few words to the leader of the orchestra, he mounted the platform as the music ceased in the middle of a bar and, seeing that this had the desired effect of causing every pair of eyes to turn toward him, he raised his hand and said in loud tones: "Ladies and gentlemen, you all know now that there has been a theft here to-night. But what you don't know is that the thieves are still in this house. No, there is no danger as long as no one attempts to leave this room, for the house and the grounds everywhere have been taken charge of by the police. There is going to be a search made for the guilty men, so I would advise no one to leave this room until the word is given. It may take only a few minutes and again it may take two or more hours to effect a capture. Therefore, any who care to leave now will have to submit to being searched by Sergeant of Detectives Jeffries."

Fleming waited a minute or so, then as no one made a move he nodded to the orchestra leader who struck his baton upon the music stand and, the musicians responding, the dancing, in more or less of a half-hearted fashion, was resumed.

As Fleming and Jeffries were moving towards the door, the former requested: "I should like very much to have full sway in this search because you see I—"

"But—" Jeffries interrupted to expostulate.

Fleming, however, anticipated him by reminding:

"I think it was agreed that I was to be in full charge and I see no reason why I should not exercise my authority and my rights."

"Certainly, certainly, Doctor. All that concerns us is that you capture the thieves."

Fleming now began to give instructions. "In the first place," he said, "I want absolute silence—that is my first requisite. Second, I want four men with drawn revolvers in each hand to be placed and kept at intervals along the wall where Mangold is stationed. The other men you may place where you deem best. And now I shall take you to within fifteen feet of the thieves."

Mangold saluted the two men in silence as they approached and immediately Fleming, with his nose close to the wall, sniffed silently, moving only about six feet while Jeffries and the aide watched him in amusement and not a little wonderment. Then they saw him point.

The four men arrived by this time and were delegated to their stations as Fleming desired, while he again turned his attention to the wall, this time to commence, rather stealthily, to run his hand lightly up and down and across the wainscoting, not making the slightest sound in his movements. And, a short time later, the men watching him noted a pleased smile cross his countenance and without removing his hand from the spot where it rested, without changing his position the fraction of an inch, he beckoned, with his free hand, for the men to

gather in, one on each side of him. This accomplished, he then for the first time made a sound; his hand pressed inwardly and something clicked, but ere he could make another move a bullet came from behind the wall, whizzed by his head, miraculously missed it and flattened itself against the opposite wall. In the near wall a hole was visible. This was the signal for concerted action.

The detectives, as if they had been bowled over by a mighty blast, were flat on their stomachs, and so was Fleming, having been pulled down by the aide who had been standing directly behind him.

Jeffries now took command and dispatched a man to hold the ball-room door closed while he ordered: "One shot!"

Instantly one shot banged through the wall directly above Fleming's head. Nor had the sound died away than from behind the wall came four bullets in rapid succession.

"One more shot!" ordered Jeffries again.

There was another shot sent crashing into the wall which was answered by a series of bullets, all of which went over the recumbent men.

"They haven't many more bullets left," Jeffries whispered to Fleming as he again ordered his men to shoot once.

There was no answering bullet, which gave Jeffries the information he sought. He arose to his feet and the others followed suit.

Fleming was at the wall again: he touched something: there was a click: he slid a panel open.

"Come out of there before I count ten or be shot to death like rats in a trap," called Jeffries, and slowly began counting: "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten." But no one emerged, so, waiting only to draw a deep breath he commanded: "Three shots apiece, boys—at the opening!"

Simultaneously five shots rang hollowly into the aperture, followed quickly by ten more. It was a certainty that anyone hiding therein could not escape being hit by at least one of the bullets, even though they, as the detectives had done, lay flat upon the floor, because more than one shot had been aimed at the ground.

The smoke had not yet cleared away when Jeffries and Mangold, with the aid of electric flash-lamps, surveyed as much of the place as possible; then, satisfied that there was no danger, Mangold stuck his head inside and peered about for a more thorough inspection. And a minute later he entered the late hiding place of Wilkshire and Burkhart where he was immediately joined by Jeffries.

The interior, back and sides, was of brick as was also the flooring: the inside walls and the ceiling however were of solid wood. Escape seemed impossible yet strangely perplexing and a bit shocking, it is true, to the three men—Fleming having forthwith joined Jeffries and Mangold—who expected to

find one or two wounded or dead men, there was not a sign of a human being.

The fresh air, rushing in through the opening, dispelled the smell of burned powder in less than no time and so Fleming again immediately put to test his now proven practical experiment. He sniffed incessantly.

"The birds have flown," almost snarled Jeffries, disgusted with himself and everybody else as well.

Fleming paid no attention to him, for he was busy running his hand over the ceiling, which was about a foot above his head. It was evident that he was searching for something and presently he found what he wanted, for there was a click and Jeffries saw him slide back part of the ceiling, this action revealing a small overhead recess or cupboard. And Jeffries looked up with surprise to see, inside, two figures crouching in the corner.

For Wilkshire and Burkhart the game was up.

"Come on, you two!" thundered Jeffries. "I think an automobile spin will be good for your constitutions."

Obediently the two men descended. And a thorough search revealed that Jeffries' surmise had been correct: their revolvers were empty.

While Jeffries and a vanguard marched the two prisoners to the waiting police auto-patrol, Fleming went to the door of the ball-room and opened it. The men and women guests were crouched there, their faces ashen, their bodies trembling, and al-

though they had wanted to get in touch with the progress of the search, they were too thoroughly frightened to open the door.

Fleming sought Mrs. Allyn. "Your necklace has been recovered," was the glad news he imparted to her. Then went on to explain: "The police will return it to you in a few days—they are retaining it as a silent but material witness. And you may say to the others of your set who have been the victims of these men that the chances are most favorable for the return of their valuables."

CHAPTER XII

MISS SIMPSON LOSES HER CASE

The Municipal Court room, that is, the Criminal Division, was crowded the next morning when Burkhart and Wilkshire were arraigned on the charge of robbery.

Mrs. Allyn, who had just stepped from the witness stand after having identified her necklace, had no sooner left the room than Wilkshire was seen to make a sudden move toward his head and then—

There was a chorus of astounded exclamations from the police, for where a moment before had stood the Englishman, Wilkshire, there was now James O'Conner, alias Con, black hair disheveled, while in his hand he held a yellow wig. And by his side, now undisguised, too, stood Bud Hicks. The sarcastic smile which played about O'Conner's mouth relaxed and, raising his hand as a signal that he wished to speak, silence fell over the others. Said he:

"Your Honor and the Police, I wish to congratulate Doctor Fleming here, and so ought you, be-

cause had it not been for him you would never have caught us."

As O'Conner was taken to his cell, Odette Simpson stepped up to Neill to remind him of his promise and Neill, nodding his head affirmatively, said:

"Miss Simpson, you may see your man to-morrow morning and as often after that as you desire."

"Thank you—and I hope that this will be his last offense," said Odette, wherewith she took her departure.

That afternoon the newspapers gave unstinted space to the recent jewel robberies and to the capture of the thieves, which, summed up, read:

"The many recent jewel robberies which have harrassed the police for the past few weeks because of the cleverness of the thieves and their ability to ward off capture had a dramatic finish last night and this morning. . . .

"To Dr. George Edward Fleming of this city is due a vote of thanks by the citizens. It was through the aid of Advanced Medical Science that the capture was possible. Dr. Fleming's method of apprehending criminals is a new innovation and of the greatest aid to the police since the adoption of the Bertillion System. Interviewed, Dr. Fleming said: 'It is easy to detect the presence of a known criminal by the Bromidrosis Method. However, in order to be successful, one must have a smattering knowledge of the medical subject of the skin. I have been a student of the human cuticle and its peculiari-

ties for years. My highly developed sense of smell I trace to my Indian ancestors. Now, every person has an individual skin odor with the single exception of the Japs, who have no cuticle odors whatsoever. Therefore, the police will have to employ certified graduates of the School of Bromidrosis in order that the employment of my method may be effective. I can, without having seen or touched a person, detect the sex, comparative age and the state of health of that individual, simply through the odor of the cuticle. This man O'Conner has an odor that is extremely rare; in fact, only one other person is known to have possessed it, and that was Alexander the Great—it is the odor of violets. There is no doubt in my mind that were we to trace O'Conner's ancestry we should find that he is a descendant of that General.'

"Dr. Fleming, when asked whether bloodhounds were not the instigators of the idea, answered: 'Bloodhounds have absolutely no sense of cuticle odors, but track solely by the odor of the blood.'

"At noon to-day a special meeting of council was held and Dr. Fleming was petitioned to accept the office, newly created, of Commissioner of Detectives at a salary of ten thousand dollars per annum. Dr. Fleming immediately accepted."

. . . . . .

Early the next morning Odette Simpson presented herself at Neill's office. He had not yet arrived nor had he left any orders to the effect that O'Con-

ner could have visitors, so she was forced to wait.

When Neill came in he greeted her with: "So I see you're bound to hold me to my promise."

Odette smiled and said: "Only by persistence can we accomplish our ends."

"Well," yielded Neill, seeing there was no way out of it, "you wait here and I'll bring O'Conner to you. It's much better to have your little heart-to-heart talk in a nice, big, airy, sunny room like this than downstairs where there is no sun and where everything spells gloom." And so, ringing for his secretary, he ordered that O'Conner be hailed upstairs.

O'Conner entered the room a few minutes later in charge of one of the station house-keepers and his expression denoted moroseness until he caught sight of Odette, then there was a swift transition to happiness, yet this only lasted momentarily, for again he was cast into gloom.

Said Neill: "O'Conner, you know we've changed the charge to grand larceny and that you have been remanded to the Grand Jury without bail, so that I thought while you were awaiting trial we'd give you a little free entertainment. Do you care to talk to Miss Simpson?"

"If she cares to talk to me I will," answered O'Conner."

"You seem to know her," observed Neill.

"Yes, I do—and I'll never forget her because—well, just because."

"Very well, I'll let you two talk alone, but remember, O'Conner, that you're on probation and no rough stuff goes as long as you are talking to her."

"That is the last thing I would do in her presence," asserted O'Conner with such sincerity that Neill was forced to believe him.

"Mr. O'Conner, why do you persist in taking things to which you have no legal right?" were Odette's first words after Neill had quitted the room.

O'Conner looked at the girl shamefacedly and, with a little nervous twitch to his mouth, answered: "I guess it's because I simply can't help it—just the same as you can't help being so good."

"You mean to say that it's the same motive?"

"Well, it is the same and yet it's different; but I guess both conditions are due to associations."

"But can't you stop it? Haven't you ever tried?"

"Oh, yes, I've tried, but—"

"How hard have you tried?"

"As hard as any man could ask of me."

"And why didn't you stick to it?"

"Why didn't I? Well, principally, if I had I'd have starved to death and I didn't fancy doing that."

Odette shook her head and put her argument in the form of the question: "Well, how about all the other men who don't steal? Do they starve?"

"No—not many of them, but then you see they haven't been crooks all their lives and I have and

that's one difference. And another one is that my constitution isn't the same as theirs, and still another is that my raising wasn't what it should have been."

"You mean to say you have been brought up to be a crook?" inquired Odette, her voice the very essence of incredulity.

"Oh, no, not that. My mother was a gentlewoman and my father was an Army man, but they both died when I was a mere youngster and somehow or other, as there was no money left, I was thrown on the world to shift for myself as best I could."

"But weren't there any relatives?"

O'Conner shook his head negatively.

"That was too bad," sympathized Odette.

"Yes, it was He— I beg your pardon, it was rather tough for a youngster like myself. And ever since then I have always pitied every poor little shaver who has to get out and hustle."

"But there are plenty of homes for dependent children."

"So there are, but I'd rather be dead than be in some home living on charity—and I guess the majority of little kids would too. Life is not what it's cracked up to be, Miss Simpson."

"No—you are right. Life isn't what it ought to be, yet as we must live, we might as well make the best and the most of it and ourselves."

"That's what I think."

"But you're not living up to it—to the best that is in you."

"Indeed I am—I'm doing the best I know how."

"Do you call it the best by stealing other people's property? Do you call that honorable? Or praiseworthy?"

"Oh, in its way it's honorable—as honorable as any commercial king cornering any commodity of life while people are kicking about the high cost of living and he getting rich while the poor devils of stockholders are facing ruin. It's just the name they give things that makes them right or wrong, that's all."

"But don't you know that God knows and sees everything we do and that he sent our Lord Jesus Christ to earth to make better souls of us and that He died so that we might be better and live better lives? And don't you know that every wrong act of yours is recorded against you, making the chances for your entrance to Heaven so much less?"

"That's what preachers say, but is it really so?"

"Don't you believe in God?"

"To tell you the truth, Miss Simpson, I've never given it much thought."

"And haven't you ever attended devotional services?"

O'Conner shook his head with hang-dog effect and admitted: "No, I've never had the time."

"But haven't you ever been taught about God and Jesus Christ and the reward of virtue?"

"I guess I haven't. You see my learning has consisted of real life and of how to get the best out of it—or as you would put it, how to get the most out of the other fellow."

"But wouldn't you reform if you could?"

"Would I? Well, honestly now, no I wouldn't. Why? Well, because I tried it once and it wasn't worth a straw."

Odette changed her tactics again and queried: "You loved your mother, didn't you, and respected and honored your father?"

"I suppose I would have had they lived—and I suppose I would have been a different man to-day, but, as I said before, I was too young when they died, and that's why it's a different story."

"But don't you know that they know everything you do?"

"Do they—really?"

"They most assuredly do."

"And you really believe it?"

Odette nodded her head in the affirmative.

"Well, I don't."

"Oh, but you must, because it is so. Your mother knows your life here and so does your father, and it causes them great sorrow. So if not for your own sake, you should reform for theirs."

O'Conner arose saying: "It's no use, Miss Simpson, I can't reform—and you could talk from now until Doomsday and it wouldn't change me. Fate has booked me to be a thief and a thief I've got to

be—and as long as it's got to be so, I've made up my mind to be the best thief who ever lived."

Neill now entered and Odette directed toward O'Conner the query: "May I come and see you again?"

Answered O'Conner: "Suit yourself, but I warn you now that you'll only be wasting your time and energy."

"We'll see," said Odette, her voice tinged with sadness, but not denoting lack of hope.

And this ended Odette's first effort to reform James O'Conner. Would it be her last?

. . . . . .

Two weeks later James O'Conner and Bud Hicks, having been found guilty of many thefts, were sentenced to from three to fifteen years in the penitentiary. It had been expected.

CHAPTER XIII

HAGEN AND WARREN

The advent of a new guard at a penitentiary is an event only because it is a break in the monotony of convict life. Yet the presence of a new guard at the penitentiary where Jackson Miller was Warden and where James O'Conner, convict-clerk in the Commissary Department was serving out a penal sentence was much more—it was an Occasion.

Both O'Conner and Bud Hicks caught sight of the new guard that night as they were eating supper and as a consequence O'Conner's otherwise splendid digestion, when he became aware that the guard in question was on duty on the tier where was located his cell and that of Bud Hicks, was not up to standard; the food in his stomach seemed *de trop*.

The new guard was known to O'Conner and to Hicks and was none other than Salim Hagan, known among the cult as the slickest pickpocket in the profession, and because of this, coupled with some strange decree of Fate, unknown to the police. From which may be gathered that Hagan had never suffered confinement in any kind of a jail.

Under ordinary circumstances the presence of Hagan would have caused O'Conner unalloyed joy, but the fact remained that he and Hagan were not on the best of terms, the estrangement having resulted from a quasi-excitable tiff over an inconsequential matter, yet which occurrence neither had forgotten nor forgiven. For both realized that it is ever the trivial matter, whatever its phase, which accounts for the serious. Therefore, Hagan in civilian clothes did not cause O'Conner to give him a second thought, but Hagan in the blue uniform of a penitentiary guard was a far different consideration and responsible for no little amount of worry on the parts of both O'Conner and Hicks.

The matter was a grave problem which must be solved as quickly as possible. Had Hagan reformed? And if so what was he doing in his present position? Again, if he had not mended his ways, why was he at the penitentiary, a free men? So, just before going to sleep O'Conner resolved that at the earliest possible moment he would confide to Hicks his distrust of Hagan.

With the morning came another resolve, and now as he hummed almost inaudibly under his breath as he went about his labors in the Commissary Department, opening the tightly nailed boxes and crates which contained the food supply for the institution, his mind was not at all perturbed. O'Conner would have sung louder—and his voice was not unmusical at that—he even would have whistled

somewhat gayly had not prison rules in generations gone by and which rules still prevailed, put whistling and singing on the taboo list.

Suddenly O'Conner ceased to hum, glanced about him surreptitiously and at the only other man in the room, an individual who, like himself, was serving a penal sentence and who, at present, was in a far corner removing the goods from the boxes and crates—all canned stuffs, vegetables known as seconds—and placing them on the shelves in symmetrical order. Then satisfied that he was not being observed, he commenced to hum again while he bent low over a box which he had just opened.

O'Conner had made a discovery and with it, simultaneously, there had been born an idea, the happiest in the fourteen months of his imprisonment.

How O'Conner had come to be made a clerk in the Commissary Department was interesting. He never grouched, never complained, never became unruly, and thus was soon in the good graces of all the prison officials. On one occasion several of the prisoners had attempted to rush the guards, but O'Conner, seeing that their efforts would be futile, had assisted to restore order. Then, at another time, there was danger of a prison wail, that most officially dreaded of all prison sounds, but O'Conner and Hicks, perceiving that no good would come of it, had promptly choked the ring-leaders into silence and unconsciousness and had thus cowed the others. So, the guards, appreciating this service, had re-

ported to Warden Miller, and as a consequence O'Conner had been promoted to his present clerkship and Hicks had been made a stock-keeper in the overall factory. And, thereafter, life for these two men had been more tolerable, although not satisfactory. However, the two decided that until something extraordinary transpired it was best to leave well enough alone and better to live in comparative comfort than by any miscue on their part incur the enmity of the guards or the Warden.

That they meant to escape was a certainty. But the ordinary methods, they realized, such as sawing their cell bars or digging tunnels or the hundred and one other tricks that are absolutely useless and prove as valuable as money is to a man on an uninhabited island, they realized would avail them no liberty.

In short, Con and Bud accepted their imprisonment philosophically and bided their time, even though it proved to be heartbreakingly irksome.

But now, with O'Conner's discovery, the prospect underwent a complete metamorphosis.

"Sss!" sounded from O'Conner in no more audible tone than had been his humming.

The other man glanced over towards O'Conner, then looked about the room, after which he moved quickly yet silently over to his co-worker's side.

O'Conner pointed to a box he had just opened. Unlike the others there was an inner covering of excelsior.

"What is it?" whispered the other man, Chuck Warren, who had been sent up from the Southern part of the State.

In lieu of answer O'Conner removed the excelsior covering, disclosing to view a phonograph and several cylinders, and wedged in between these was an envelope.

"What good?" Warren whispered.

O'Conner scarcely breathed at the effort, figuratively, as he said, under his tongue, the one word: "Escape."

Warren's habitual expression of gloom altered for perhaps a minute and a smile, such as one would never have imagined such a combination of features could possibly produce so full of good nature was it, swept over and lighted his countenance, but as quickly and as astonishingly as it had appeared, it faded, and he inquired nervously: "Am I in on it?"

O'Conner nodded affirmatively.

Thereupon Warren returned to his duties in the corner satisfied, for he knew O'Conner and his type and was aware that when a word was given it was kept.

The room used as the Commissary Department was seldom entered by any of the prison officials, so O'Conner had the opportunity to nail shut the box with the phonograph, after he had extracted the envelope therefrom. He did not deem it wise to at-

tempt to ascertain what the envelope contained, just then, so he deftly hid it in his sock to read it in the seclusion of his cell that night. There now confronted him the problem of how to keep the box out of the way for a sufficient length of time to enable him to hit upon a consistent plan for using the phonograph to the best advantage, and until such a time as he could apprise Bud of the trend of affairs.

O'Conner looked around, but could see no corner nor other safe place where the box could be held without being detected sooner or later. But Fate seemed to favor him, for when he was almost finished with the last box and when it seemed to him that after all the hope of escape would prove to be but a mirage, another shipment of food arrived and thus he was enabled to hide the particlular box until at least late the following afternoon. This he did.

That night O'Conner took off his shoes with the utmost care and stretched himself on his cot, covering his entire body with the bed clothes, then cautiously he reached down to his sock for the envelope when, like a shock, his hand came in contact with something that felt like a small piece of folded paper. This was not in his sock. However, being far too wise and too well schooled in prison life, he gave no visible heed of his discovery, for, as yet, he had not solved the question of the meaning of Hagan's presence as a guard. So he decided that whatever it was, he would discover later in the night, and

therefore, he lay, for a long, long while, fretting and fuming inwardly and planning and worrying not a little bit.

The next consciousness of O'Conner was when he awakened to hear the clock just outside the prison walls chime the hour of four. It was still dark. For some few minutes he lay absolutely motionless, waiting for some slight noise, for some movement to tell him that it would not be wise to investigate the contents of the envelope that he had purloined from the box that day and also to discover what the other object was. Then, being satisfied that there was not the slightest sound, he stealthily pulled from the depths of the bed clothes the envelope. And could have danced with joy as he read:

"DIRECTIONS

"*This box contains one phonograph and six blank records with a 'shaving outfit.' The 'shaving outfit' consists of one recorder, one horn and other essentials. To make a record, attach cylinder in regular way, then attach horn to proper adjustment. Sing or talk or whisper with mouth close to horn. Every sound will be reproduced upon the delicate fibers. Recorder must be attached to Part X.*"

The directions were very simple and O'Conner read them over three times in order to memorize them, then, after wetting the paper thoroughly so as to make no noise, he tore it into shreds. He was

cognizant that to tear dry paper noiselessly is well-nigh impossible. Then, going over to the window, bit by bit he dropped the paper through the iron bars to the ground below. And thus having disposed of Exhibit No. 1, Incriminating Evidence, he turned his attention to the bit of material under the covers. Bringing it to view it proved to be a bit of folded paper and, with a perplexed expression, he flattened that which was a note. So with a heart full of thanksgiving and a wild hope he read:

"Gang sent me to help you and Hicks. Communicate any plans.—H."

This note O'Conner treated to the same process as the instructions and, two minutes later, having divested himself of his clothing, he crawled under the covers and immediately went to sleep.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PHANTOM RIOT

In a penitentiary individual desires are subservient to the most essential needs to keep the human body from demoralizing into complete decay. There one is not pampered nor can he have that which he wants unless acquired by methods peculiar to precedent. Therefore, paper and pencil were luxuries.

O'Conner desired to leave a note for Hagan under his bed covers that morning in order that he might be acquainted with the plans for escape and which plans, at the present, were but in the embryo stage. Yet O'Conner knew that it was impossible to communicate with this particular guard until the morning following. This he knew for a surety for, as clerk in the Commissary Department, paper and pencil were accessible to him and it remained but for an opportunity to present itself during the course of the day for him to write the note. Verbal communication with Hagan was almost an impossibility owing to the fear of detection.

That day was a particularly trying one for O'Conner, because, with performing the prescribed routine

of travail and writing the note and maneuvering with the box containing the phonograph so as to keep it in a position where it would avoid probable detection, required the quintessence of wit. But, and more to the point, all in all, the day proved successful and the next morning Hagan read about the phonograph.

It was the second day after the happy discovery of the phonograph that during a short lull, Chuck Warren heard another "Sss!" and went over to O'Conner's side.

"I've got everything fixed and ready here in this box," O'Conner whispered to his assistant.

Warren merely nodded his head, for the fewer words spoken the less the fear. But he observed closely and saw O'Conner put the component parts together inside the box and in such a way that only the horn of the phonograph was visible. And he mentally gave O'Conner credit for exceeding cleverness.

O'Conner now instructed in as concise a form as was possible and in whispers: "When I start recorder call softly, but don't whisper or let another sound escape your lips while it is on, 'Help!' in as many different tones as you can make. Pay no attention to me."

Warren understood and when O'Conner touched a minute lever that started the recorder he called: "Help!" in eight octaves, while O'Conner, with a slight gurgle whispered: "Murder! Oh, God!

Murder!" This the two men continued for a little over five minutes, then without more ado, O'Conner closed the receiver.

"Get to your side of the room," ordered O'Conner and at the same time removed the horn and, after placing it in the box, quickly clamped on the lid. And accomplished this none too soon, for a second later Warden Miller, with a guard at his heels, burst into the room excitedly.

"What's the noise in here?" he demanded curtly.

Both O'Conner and Warren looked around toward the Warden with expressions of incomprehension and amazement.

"There was a noise in here. What was it?" again demanded Miller.

"The only noise we make is in opening boxes, Warden," Con ventured.

"It was voices," asserted the warden.

"It didn't come from here," O'Conner said, looking his jailer squarely in the eyes.

"So it seems," said Miller, and without another word strode from the room followed by the guard.

And that same night a guard entered the Commissary Department room and carried a tightly nailed box to his quarters, and if he had been observed no one thought it amiss.

There followed this day a week that was uneventful and except for the perfection of the plan for the escape which necessitated many notes changing hands, from O'Conner to Bud Hicks and to Hagan,

there was not the slightest surface-ripple to indicate that anything unusual was brewing in the minds of three of the prisoners and one guard. However, on Thursday of the next week, which incidentally was visitors' day at the penitentiary, the stage being set, the curtain was about to be rung up on a thrilling, modern melodrama, which with the absence of faked scenes and with the aid of natural environments, promised to hold the audience, which in this case would be the newspaper-reading public, spellbound with absorbed interest until the finale. Yet better still the authors would be the principal actors in the production.

All callers must cease visiting at the penitentiary by five o'clock, for at five-thirty the prisoners are marched in squads to the dining hall and after the evening meal has been eaten, they are locked in their cells for the night.

On this particular Thursday O'Conner, Hicks and Warren ate heartily. O'Conner and Bud were in the squad presided over by Hagan and, as he put them in their respective cells, through an evident oversight, he forgot to lock the doors. Had Warren been in the same squad, Hagan would have had another lapse of memory anent locking the cell-door, but as this was not so, it promised to be quite a task to let Chuck in on the escape, for although his cell was on the same tier as that of Bud's and Con's, it was at the extreme other end of the building. However, the wind was blowing in his favor

for the keys that fitted the locks of the cell doors of the two pals would also unlock Chuck's.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Hagan passed the cell of Hicks and nodded his head slowly three times, then passed on to O'Conner's cell and repeated the performance. This had been decided upon as a signal that the time for action was propitious.

Fifteen minutes prior to this Hagan had seen Warden Miller leave the penitentiary grounds and was cognizant that only one guard remained in the office.

Hagan disappeared, was gone about ten minutes, returned hurriedly and slowed his pace only when he reached O'Conner's cell. And as he passed he whispered to O'Conner who was leaning against the bars: "Now!" Trailing along at his side was Chuck Warren.

That one small word of three letters: "Now!" was as important as though the General of a hostile army had given the command to fire upon the enemy: the results could not have been more electrifying, for scarcely had the word left his lips than from the tier above and way out toward the end of the building where there were no cells and which was the darkest part of the bastile there sounded very faintly, yet desperately, frantically and of carrying qualities and it seemed in many voices:

"Help! Help! Murder! Murder! Oh, God, Murder!"

Excitement reigned supreme! Guards with rifles and revolvers ready for action came running from every one of the three tiers of cells; they rushed past Hagan, shouting for him to remain on guard where he was and he calling back that he would do so. And from every cell there peered white-faced prisoners, vainly attempting to acquaint themselves with the direction from which the cries emanated and the whyfore of them. And all the while the appeals for help continued unabated.

Confusion amounting almost to a panic was sweeping the guards hither and thither, due to their inability to find the exact locality from which the sound came. It was horrifying and uncanny! And the reason for this lay in the fact that Hagan had had sufficient foresight to hide the phonograph between the flooring of the upper tier and the ceiling of the second tier, thus partially covering the source of the sounds and prolonging the return of the guards to their posts. Thus, with the calls of the guards and the answering calls of Hagan, it was small wonder that the other prisoners should add to the din and that in a few minutes bedlam broke loose, some of the men cursing, others moaning, while not a few joined in the calls for help and of murder. Yet amid all this hubbub there were four men as cool as though nothing were transpiring.

O'Conner and Hicks remained in their cells only long enough to be certain beyond all shadow of a doubt that no more guards would pass, then they

opened their cell doors and joined Hagan and Warren, while Hagan, between his intervaled shouts that everything was O. K. with him, handed O'Conner a piece of stout rope.

"Bind my feet first," Hagan instructed, lying on the floor.

O'Conner, with the assistance of Hicks, had Hagan securely bound in a jiffy. And while they were thus occupied the guard reached into two of his pockets and, drawing forth two automatic revolvers, handed them to Warren, saying:

"One of you will have to tote this gun. Sorry, but I couldn't get my hands on three of these quick-action men, but you'll not likely have any trouble—in fact, I don't think you'll have to use them."

"Not unless we're cornered," asserted O'Conner. "We want to save that ammunition—we may need it later."

"Be careful with that gag," Hagan warned. "Not too tight." And, as Bud was about to adjust it to his month, he said: "There's only one guard in the office. That's all you'll need to know. Now, slip the silencer and beat it!"

Swiftly the three men made their way to the iron stairway and down this to the door of the office. The babel from above had not yet subsided in any way whatsoever but, as long as the massive door of iron remained closed, little sound could penetrate to the office; however, the moment the door was opened the guard therein would be on the qui vive.

"I'll go in first and let him cover me," said Con with his hand on the knob, "but above all act quick enough so that he can't take my gun away." And so, with this parting injunction, he swung the door on its steel hinges and entered.

The guard, first at the sound of the turmoil and then at sight of Con sprang up out of his chair, but before he managed to "cover" O'Conner that individual gained a position where the guard, in order to keep his revolver trained on him, would have his back to the door. This was what O'Conner desired. And then, just as the guard was in the act of putting the whistle to his mouth, the blowing of which would summon aid, Bud, who had entered stealthily, hit him over the head with the butt of his revolver and the guard fell to the floor unconscious.

"Unload that rifle and take the guard's bull-dog instead of that lumbersome gun," directed O'Conner, as he made for the exit door. But, to his chagrin, he found this door locked and no key in the hole. For a moment he was in a quandary, but turning to Warren he ordered:

"Get those keys from that man!"

Warren had the keys in a second—a bunch of ten.

"Nix," growled O'Conner, eyeing the bunch savagely. He had seen at a glance that none of them would fit the door.

Hicks, a dozen feet away, raised his revolver and, taking careful aim at the lock, was about to

shoot when O'Conner stopped him with a gesture.

"You fool—this door's iron and any shot will rouse the guards outside if they aren't already wise," he hissed angrily, and, at the same time moved over to one of the windows. This was also locked but easily opened. Fortunately only the lower half was iron-barred.

Dexterous ability O'Conner displayed, and wonderful ingenuity concerning the time which had elapsed since he had had sufficient and proper exercise to keep his body and muscles in accustomed condition, when he lowered the upper window sash and climbed out on to the wide casement. Here he stopped only a sufficient length of time to assure himself that Bud and Chuck would follow suit, then dropped to the ground.

Swiftly the three ran across the grounds toward the exit gate, keeping as much as possible in the shadows, scarcely a rustle did they make in their speedy flight and presently, unobserved, undetected, reached the shadow of the fifteen-foot brick wall which surrounded the grounds. Along the base of this they made their way to within ten yards of the guard house at the entrance, then slowed down to a snail's pace. There was always a guard at this entrance, they knew, the gate to which was never locked, also they were cognizant that to have attempted to scale this wall would have been worse than folly, for then they would have made easy targets for the bullets of the guard.

It was O'Conner's hobby that he had never killed a man and he wished to preserve this record as long as was possible. So, when within ten feet of the gate, he panted under his breath: "Easy. That guy is looking our way and I wouldn't be surprised if he was hep."

O'Conner's surmise had been correct, for suddenly the guard crouched low and pointed his rifle in the direction of the men, but Warren, who had his revolver trained upon this human obstacle to their liberty, did not give him an opportunity to pull the trigger for a bullet from his revolver hit square in the very nick of time.

It was now a case of run or fight for their lives, for they were well aware that the shot had been heard by other guards and so their doom was spelled. Therefore, taking the lesser danger they made a wild rush for the outside and had no more than cleared the gateway than they heard several shots fired and a whistle blow.

Some men when extraordinary situations appear necessitating strenuous efforts are panic-stricken to the point of immobility, but O'Conner and Hicks and Warren, having more or less all their lives played with fire, so to speak, were equal to the demands of the occasion and fleetingly they ran the three hundred feet to the railroad yards. And as they reached the tracks a freight train came bowling along at a fair clip.

"Jump this!" said O'Conner.

It was an easy matter for the men to board one of the cars and after this they made their way to the caboose at the tail end, having encountered no one in their perilous climb along the tops of more than half a dozen box cars.

Bud opened the door of the caboose and five men looked into the muzzle of his revolver, and, as he advanced, they beheld two more men directly behind him with revolvers leveled at them, making three who wore the garb of the penitentiary and whose determined expressions evinced that any interference would be met in most strenuous fashion.

O'Conner acted as spokesman and in a tone that carried the impression of geniality he said: "Boys, we're not going to harm you as long as you act white. But,"—here his voice became a menace and a warning at one and the same time—"the first crooked move and we won't be accountable for what happens. Now, suppose that just for the sake of your own protection and to prevent us from becoming possible murderers, all of you throw your guns on that upper bunk in the corner."

While the trainmen were not cowards, they were not fools and so, simultaneously, five revolvers were tossed in the air and fell on the bunk which O'Conner had indicated.

"So far so good," O'Conner smilingly evinced his satisfaction, then, after a few minutes' consideration, he continued: "The next thing on the list is clothes. Of course, we don't want anything for

nothing, so we'll buy your clothes—call it a forced sale on credit—for you know we haven't any money with us now. But you three write your names and addresses on a piece of paper and we'll remit to you by money order."

Thus, a short time later, three pairs of trousers, three shirts, three coats and three hats were at the disposal of the escapees.

"Gentlemen, within ten days each of the owners of these duds will receive forty dollars," said O'Conner. "I guess that will reimburse you. And besides you'll get your clothes back by parcel post. O'Conner is my name and these other two friends of mine are Bud Hicks and Chuck Warren. Sorry we can't shake hands and offer to treat, but you see our collective health won't stand for such little niceties of civilization. But you can bank on it that if ever we can do any of you a favor, all you need do is to mention it."

The train crew fairly gasped, for the records of Con and Bud and Chuck were well known.

O'Conner now turned to Warren with the instructions: "Here, Chuck"—throwing him a coat, a shirt and a pair of trousers—"you get dolled up first while Bud and I keep watch." And to Bud: "Bud, it will be your turn, after which I'll see how I look in a color not gray. And then as a fitting finale we'll throw these beloved tattle-tale uniforms to the weeds."

Within ten minutes the change of clothes had

been made and O'Conner, turning again to the railroaders and in tones eminently conversational, said: "Boys, suppose all of you come up to this end of the car while we get to the rear. And if duty takes any of you outside one of us will accompany you." Then he turned to Bud with the forethought: "The three of us will need sleep, so you lie down on one of these bunks for two hours, then Chuck will take his turn at snoring and last, but not least, yours truly will sink into the arms of Morpheus. If this train keeps on at this rate, we'll be somewhere by morning."

Slowly the night wore on. At rare intervals it was necessary for one of the crew to leave the caboose to receive dispatching orders from the hand of some sleepy station agent and on these occasions one of the three fugitives trailed along. Otherwise the trend of events was montonous.

It was shortly after dawn when the train ran onto a siding to allow a limited express to thunder by.

"How far are we from the State line?" Hicks inquired of one of the men.

"About two miles," came the answer.

Bud awakened Con and, after a short parley, O'Conner said to the crew:

"Boys, we've decided to leave you here. Awfully sorry we can't ride longer, but for the second time within twenty-four hours our collective health demands that we disembark."

"You're not as bad as you've been painted," was

the verbal opinion of one of the railroaders. And, as the train moved off, he called: "Don't forget to remit."

The three men found themselves in a virgin country. Rolling hills were everywhere with ever and anon, as though but to please the eye of man, in peaceful repose a valley. And as the sun crossed the Eastern horizon, it produced a feeling of awe.

"This is certainly better than the air in the pen," observed Bud, stretching his arms high over his head in exultation.

Con and Chuck agreed by inhaling deeply of the primeval ozone. And, being miles from the nearest habitation, and the train having been gone some twenty minutes, they, without any fear of apprehension, enjoyed to the fullest this initiation to freedom. So, shortly thereafter, finding a secluded nook hard by, as with one mind they threw themselves to the ground and promptly went to sleep.

When they awoke the sun was near the zenith. Surmising that word of their escape had by this time been forwarded to all the towns along the railroads and that the crew of the freight train would, at the first opportunity, report its experience, the three realized the danger of following the tracks and so struck off across country. And as they walked they discussed plans for the future.

CHAPTER XV

WESTWARD HO!

JAMES O'CONNER, alias Con; Robert Hicks, alias Bud; Henry Warren, alias Chuck! A fine combination, it is true! Con, the King of Clubs; Bud, the King of Diamonds; Chuck, the King of Spades! Hearts never entered into any game the three men played: love of woman was to them a thing unknown. Three of a kind that could and, moreover, would outbluff any flush ever dealt in wits and daring.

O'Conner, as he walked along the country road, fell into a mood which was partly sullen and partly a reverie, while Bud and Chuck were wide awake, talkative and effervescent.

"Why the grouch, Con?" inquired Bud.

"You're surely not hungry?" came forth from Chuck.

To which two queries O'Conner answered with the monosyllable: "No."

A brief season of silence and then Bud forwarded: "What's on your mind?"

"I'll tell you presently."

"Why not unburden now?"

"You wouldn't pick any fruit to eat that wasn't ripe, would you?"

"I knew he was hungry," observed Chuck.

"I am—but that's not what's made me uncommunicative."

"Well, we're hungry too—maybe hungrier than you are and just look how happy we are."

"Oh, I guess I'm the goat then."

"Your guess is bad, because if you were Mister Billy, you'd be eating some of this grass right now."

"All right, have it your way, but I wish you'd let me alone until I get through thinking."

Thereafter Bud and Chuck contented themselves with each other's companionship sans the inimitable voice of O'Conner to make a trio until presently with yells of delight they sighted and made for a lone cherry orchard and, in lieu of anything else, made a meal of that fruit. Chuck, who had wandered a bit away from Bud and Con, came back to report that he had discovered a cow nearby and was for having a fine quaff of milk when Con stopped him with:

"You'd be a fine one on our hands with a combination of milk and cherries inside of you. We've got enough to do to tote our own bodies along without lugging you as a helpless, flabby mass. Better let well enough alone. Your stomach's full, so what more do you want?"

After a short rest they again commenced to walk

—perhaps for some twenty minutes, O'Conner now lagging behind more or less three hundred yards while every once in a while Bud or Chuck would wheel around to call back to him some inanities, but so far as they were concerned they could have addressed their facetious remarks to the air, for there was absolutely no response. However, half an hour later, as they were resting on the cross beams of an old-fashioned, almost dilipidated covered bridge, Con's eyes lighted and to the others he exclaimed:

"By jinks! I have it!"

"What?" growled Chuck, who was almost too tired to be civil.

"The way we're going to make money and get West where we aren't known," answered O'Conner with hilarious enthusiasm.

"All right—spout," said Bud.

And thereafter, for half an hour, O'Conner outlined his plans and they met with the hearty approbation of Hicks and Warren and had the effect to make the latter forget his grouch.

. . . . . .

Across the State line there is a town of some forty thousand inhabitants. Into this town trooped three weary men who kept well in the darkened spots, for they had waited on the outskirts until the fall of night. And immediately they had entered each took a divergent route, to meet again, two hours later, at the spot where they separated. And when they met there again and counted the spoils of crook-

war, they found that each was richer, after an equal division, by one hundred and thirty-seven dollars.

In this town they did not tarry, but immediately proceeded due West some eighteen miles to a town of approximately five thousand souls. This place they reached early in the morning and, after partaking of a substantial breakfast, made purchases of all clothes needed to give a man the appearance of a gentleman. After this they registered at the best hotel the town afforded under assumed names and before doing anything else, sent to three railroad men forty dollars, making a total of one hundred and twenty dollars. Hicks attended to the purchasing of the money orders while Con indited a letter to the home town and, in particular, to one of his old pals, and which letter he read to the other two when Hicks returned. It ran:

"We are here in this town, Post Office noted above, under assumed names. We are almost broke, but I have decided that we won't be that for long and the way out of the woods is to use our old card stunt which we haven't done for ten years. So, if you will send me, by express collect, a suit case full of those special decks, I shall let you in on two per cent. of our profits.

"Yours for auld lang syne,
"O'Conner, alias (new) Joseph Dodd."

This letter was dispatched with a special delivery stamp attached.

"How long will it take for the cards to get here?" inquired Warren, with a tinge of impatience.

"It oughtn't to take longer than three days at the most," answered O'Conner.

"And you mean to say we've got to loaf for three solid days?" chorused Bud and Chuck.

"Not if I know my name. These next two days will be the busiest you've ever spent, for you're going to school—a school whereby you will master the art of selling cards—and I'm to be the teacher."

Therefore, by noon of the second day, both Hicks and Warren were masters of the art of selling cards and knew by heart every special mark that was scrolled on the back of the cards that were coming and the indications thereof.

O'Conner had guessed correctly as to the time required for the transmission of the suit case and so, on the fourth day, bright and early in the morning, Bud and Chuck, each laden with a suitcase, half of which contained cards and the other half clothes, set out upon the business of selling playing cards.

. . . . . .

The rear part of the saloon of Dan Hawthorne in the town of Walton is the rendezvous for all those whose tendencies are for gambling, whether inherited or applied. So, when into Walton there wandered, by way of the branch railroad, a man by the name of Joseph Dodd, presumably a prospective buyer of a farm, he was initiated into Hawthorne's Back-Room Club.

There were two games of poker going at the time —at one table Stud, at the other table a Jack-pot game.

For quite some time Dodd, with merely indifferent interest, watched the progress of the two games. Then he was invited to join. But he refused. However, he still lingered. An hour passed. Then one of the players, having other business to transact elsewhere, left a vacancy. This Dodd was asked to fill. He accepted. He bought the usual amount of chips which cost him two dollars.

Dodd, on the first round, stayed in the game although all that he had drawn was a pair of treys. The second round he fared little better. The third round he didn't even draw a pair.

"Suppose we have another deck of cards," he suggested to Hawthorne.

Hawthorne went behind the counter and brought forth a new deck of cards for which the kitty was charged twenty cents.

The game proceeded. Three more hands were dealt; three times Dodd lost. He was on his last chip when he called for another deck. The proprietor started for the case where the cards were kept when he was interrupted by Shultz, who protested:

"I don't see why we should have so many decks all at once, Hawt'orne."

This protest was met by a chorus of: "That's all right," and: "That's the way big games are

played," and: "Don't pay no attention to him, Mr. Dodd, 'cause he's a miser."

So Hawthorne brought out the new deck and, just as he was about to take the twenty cents from the kitty, Dodd said:

"You let me pay for this deck. I see it isn't the custom here to have a new deck, but I'm a superstitious sort of fellow and—"

There was a short debate which ended in the universal agreement that henceforth Dodd should pay for all the new decks that were used. Was Dodd willing? He was.

But Dodd continued to lose despite his many changes of decks. Another hour elapsed and then he asserted: "Gentlemen, I'm going to buy my fifth stack of chips and I'm going to change cards maybe once or twice again."

"But I have no more decks," said Hawthorne, then immediately he remembered: "Oh, sure I have —there's some sample decks that a drummer for a new company left here last week. Said if we liked them we could have them cheaper than these." And without more ado he brought forth a deck of the sample cards.

Dodd took twenty cents from his stack and was about to hand them to Hawthorne when the latter said:

"I won't charge you anything for these—they cost me nothing, so they cost you nothing."

There is not anyone who, if something is presented to him in the proper way, cannot and will not accept it for nothing and so, Dodd being no exception to the rule, was satisfied.

In less than half an hour Dodd had paid back to the bank his five stacks and was eleven stacks to the good.

"I say we quit," suggested Shultz. "I don't not like diss losing business—I am *fertich.*"

And for once all the players were in accord with him.

The next day Dodd was on hand at the saloon early. He won continuously, however, at intervals, allowing the others to take in a few pots. But when they ceased to play for the day Dodd was thirty-six dollars to the good and had cleaned out everybody.

"We'll get even," said Shultz in friendly tones. "We can't play until next week and—"

"Sorry," said Dodd, "but I won't be here until week after next, because I have some business in the city that needs my attention."

Thus, from town to town Dodd played his game until he was far West of the Rocky Mountains. It was necessary for him to send money from each town where he played to two drummers who were selling decks of cards and, who, if they did not sell, invariably left from two to three samples of their goods.

Forty days later, O'Conner, alias Dodd, Bud

Hicks and Chuck Warren met in San Francisco, and, in checking up accounts, it was found that each was sixteen hundred dollars to the good.

And in commenting upon the scheme the three had worked with such success O'Conner said: "Talk about easy money—it was the softest job I've had in a coon's age. And what is better I don't think that one of those would-be gamblers will ever get wise to the fact that I put it over on them. Yet even so we can't follow up this stunt and there's the rub."

"What's the diff, anyway?" Bud Hicks queried. "Aren't you satisfied that we're where we wanted to be—and with sixteen hundred dollars in our jeans at that?"

A wistful expression entered Con's eyes as he answered: "No, I'm not satisfied. Sixteen hundred won't keep us for the rest of our lives. Of course, it will give us a chance to take a little needed rest, but after that we've got to plan out some really decent job. I'm not going to stay at this sort of thing all my life—what I want is to settle down and take things easy, but I'm not going to do it until I have some fortune laid away."

"That's the dope," agreed Warren. And Bud Hicks, after a short silence, coincided:

"I guess you're right, Con—it's not at all congenial in a penitentiary nor in an Old Man's Home."

CHAPTER XVI

CLEARING FOR ACTION

Six weeks had elapsed since O'Conner, Hicks and Warren had entered the State of California, and during this time they had "lain low," and now O'Conner had a silken Van Dyke beard, a brush mustache and he had dyed his hair to an outlandish shade of red; Hicks had acquired a decidedly lame back and limped with his right leg; Warren had lost an arm and wore pince-nez. So completely disguised were they that even Hagan could not have readily recognized them. And they were far enough distant from their old stamping grounds to be comparatively safe. Thus is evinced once more that a thief of a higher degree, to be successful, must be, besides other accomplishments, an actor of the highest capabilities.

"There," exclaimed O'Conner, holding up a piece of cardboard over which he had been working steadily for almost half an hour, "I guess I've rigged a magnet that will draw the golden shekels from those Eastern Johnny-Jump-Ups, all right, all right!"

Hicks and Warren gathered around the table and beheld, printed on the cardboard:

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS AT YOUR DOOR
RANCHES!

$50 THE ACRE $50 THE ACRE

NO MORE—NO LESS—THE FINEST
STRAWBERRIES APPLE PEAR RAISIN
ALFALFA CELERY LEMON ORANGE.
PAY LESS! — MAKE MORE! — A CINCH!
BUY NOW — WRITE TO-DAY — THINK!

GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED
GOLD HILL, CALIFORNIA.

"Say, Con—I mean, Mister Ryan, you missed your vocation," remarked Bud, laughingly. "You should have gone in for advertisement writing—I've heard those ginks make from one to two hundred dollars per week the whole year through."

"Aw, quit your joshing, Mister Lammert," retorted Ryan, good-humoredly. "Better wait until I read you my circular, then you'll think I'm there with the hot-air bull forty ways. And now, Mister Chuck Elgin, what have you to say?"

Chuck straightened his figure to its full height, his brows drew together until they formed a frown, the while his pince-nez slipped from his near-

aqueline nose and, assuming an air of dignity, the while he attempted to recover the offending glasses, he requested in a deep bass voice: "The papers, me Handsome, the papers, I says!"

"Meaning, I presume, the circular," surmised he who was now Ryan.

"Aye, aye—and make haste," continued Chuck.

Therefore, smiling yet with an expression and air of absolute servility, Ryan reached to the far end of the table and, gaining the cardboard upon which he had been laboring, moved it out of the way to reveal a sheet of paper, closely written. And, clearing his throat with much feigned gusto, he read aloud:

" 'The plan of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, is the finest that has yet been offered to the public. In its liberalness it is astounding. GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED proposes to sell one part of a one hundred and eighty thousand acre tract in the famous Gold Hill River district for fifty dollars the acre in not less than fifty-acre parcels and not more than four parcels of land to any one buyer.

" 'This land will be planted for the buyers in Winter Nellis Pears, Prunes, Spitzenberg, Jonathan and Lady Apples, Alfalfa, Strawberries, Lemons, Grapes and Oranges.

" 'An electric light plant and a water plant for private and irrigation purposes have just been completed at a cost of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, thus insuring perfect sanitation and always

an ample supply of water throughout the GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, district. For this convenience a nominal tax charge will be levied.

" 'GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, makes but one stipulation, to wit: that no bungalow may be erected on GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, lands at a cost of less than one thousand dollars and that the bungalow must be completed by the purchaser within three months after the sale is consummated; otherwise the land and everything thereon reverts to GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED.

" 'The terms of payment are: ONE-HALF cash; ONE-FOURTH the second year; the BALANCE the third year. This enables the purchase of land with a limited capital and also enables the land to PAY FOR ITSELF.

" 'In closing, we defy anyone anywhere to find a proposition HALF AS GOOD AT DOUBLE THE PRICE. It will MORE THAN PAY YOU to investigate before this bargain is a thing of past record. Therefore, write us TO-DAY! Write to GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED without a moment's delay.' "

The three men were serious now and, as Ryan finished the reading and laid the paper on the table and took up another, there was not a word of comment.

"Here," said Ryan, "is a list that cost us twenty-five dollars. Seven hundred names and all prosperous farmers." He started to read the States,

but had not mentioned more than three when the entrance of the mail interrupted him. So, giving his attention to the one letter, he slit the envelope, extracted the insert and read:

" 'Will you gentlemen be at my room in the hotel to-morrow at four?—McClatch.' "

Earl McClatch, veteran real estate man, was the sales manager for the Gold Hill Land Holdings Company which owned the one hundred and eighty thousand-acre tract, eighteen hundred acres of which O'Conner, Hicks and Warren, under their aliases had considered as a worthy tool with which to ply their profession. The three men had met McClatch some few days previous and had opened negotiations.

"Are we going?" inquired Bud.

"We are," answered Con.

And therefore at four o'clock on the following afternoon the three entered the room of Earl McClatch.

McClatch immediately offered cigars and then launched into the business to hand with the opening stereotype: "Gentlemen, I trust that you have considered favorably the purchase of the eighteen hundred acres which we discussed at our first meeting the other day." His pronunciation was exactingly precise.

O'Conner, acting as spokesman, said: "Yes—we are prepared to buy the land if we can come to satisfactory terms."

"And those are?"

"Well, the other day you asked us seven dollars the acre. We considered that too high and offered you three. Therefore, we are willing to compromise —say at four and a half or five dollars." O'Conner's expression was difficult for McClatch to penetrate.

The sales manager puffed thoughtfully at his cigar while he made a rough estimate on a scratch pad then, a few seconds later, he looked up and said: "That's nine thousand dollars." And, shaking his head, he continued with a shrewd expression: "I'm afraid that I can let you have only fifteen hundred acres at that price."

"Nine thousand dollars for eighteen hundred acres or nothing, Mister McClatch," ultimated Ryan in a firm voice.

McClatch again did some figuring on his time-gaining pad of paper ere he queried with the indirect capitulation: "How do you gentlemen propose to pay?"

"Thirty days," answered Ryan curtly.

There was another season of silence on the part of the sales manager, due to the fact that instead of considering the question at hand for the company's interest he was figuring on his commission. And, evidently, this being satisfactory, he said with a bit of hesitation: "Very well, gentlemen, we can sign the deed at once, although I want you to keep silent on the price you paid."

"We understand," said Ryan, "but we are not

yet ready to sign—that is, not until we arrange for water and lights. Five cents for light and three cents for water is our proposal."

Without a word McClatch reached for the telephone and summoned a notary public. Thereafter it required but fifteen minutes for the signing of the documents of sale. This was on the first day of May.

. . . . . .

On the fifteenth day of May a news item appeared in one of the newspapers of a Nevada town of ten thousand people which ran:

"One of the cleverest hold-ups ever perpetrated in this city was staged last night at the exclusive Miners' Club. The money taken by the thieves amounts to a little over fifteen thousand dollars.

"Three dapper-appearing men, posing as Eastern capitalists, have been living, for the past ten days, in lavish style at our best hotel. And, as a consequence, through the President of the Commercial Club were introduced two days ago at the Miners' Club. Last night the three were invited to sit in a poker game.

"According to the report of the police this morning the game in which the three men were participants had three thousand dollars in the pot. Suddenly, so the report alleges, at a quarter past one, as though with one thought, the thieves held up the room at the points of their revolvers and, grabbing everything in sight, made a hasty exit before any-

one could recover his wits. The thieves did not bother to search their victims but were satisfied with the stakes of the many games in progress. Later developments revealed the amount of currency taken.

"It is the belief of the police that the thieves boarded the early morning train for the East, but up to presstime they had not been apprehended."

The article was correct save in one particular, for instead of boarding the East-bound train the three men had entered an automobile standing at the curb of the Club and had raced westward out of town—and toward California.

And thus it was that on the twentieth day of May the Gold Hill Land Holdings Company received a certified check of nine thousand dollars in payment for eighteen hundred acres of land in Gold Hill district, the check bearing the signature of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, per James C. Ryan, President.

CHAPTER XVII

BRIGHT PROSPECTS

If we only knew exactly what we wanted it would take very little indeed to satisfy the majority of us, but, happily or sadly, the majority does not know from one minute to the next its desires. Malcolm Spruce and his brother Abner, Eastern farmers, were not exceptions; however, they were consistent enough to adhere to the satiating of any desire, no matter how long the acquisition required.

"Can you beat this?" enthusiastically demanded Malcolm Spruce of his brother Abner as he thrust before the latter's eyes a magazine devoted to the interests of Western Real Estate and Ranching, and which was opened to a page containing from margin to margin an advertisement.

Abner took the magazine and read, while a pleased smile which just escaped the bounds of a grin slowly overspread his features and broke the well-defined lines of his cheeks, the latter caused by contact with, as our nautical friend defines, "weather." And what he looked at was the advertisement of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, which commenced:

"OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS AT YOUR DOOR!"

"Doesn't that beat anything all hollow that we've seen since we decided to go West?" again demanded Malcolm.

"Have you written yet?" queried Abner, ignoring his brother's enthusiasm and cocking his head to one side.

"You bet I have—I got it down to the Post Office in time for the evening Chicago train."

"Then we'll just sit still and hold tight and see what they answer us," was Abner's sage assertion.

"But what's the use of waiting—you can't never get no place unless you move."

"No, but neither does a rolling stone gather any moss."

"Well, have it your way then."

Ten days elapsed and then the Spruce brothers received at their home near a small Pennsylvania hamlet a letter and the circular of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, together with a folder map showing to a nicety, locations, etc.

Malcolm read the matter first and then Abner, and when Abner looked up, having finished his perusal, Malcolm was busy figuring on a scrap of paper.

Abner watched him in silence for several minutes, but his curiosity getting the better of him he inquired: "What are you figuring?"

Malcolm did not heed him immediately, but kept on plying his pencil, yet presently, raising his eyes,

he said: "Abner, between us we've got nine thousand dollars—that is, we'll have it if Doc Meyer comes across. There's fifty-five hundred in Uncle Samuel's bonds we own and I reckon that it'd be a good idea to take up old man Meyer—his offer of thirty-five hundred for this place."

Abner scratched his head thoughtfully for a short period, then essayed: "Of course, we could hold off a while and maybe get four thousand from Doc."

"And maybe we wouldn't," retorted Malcolm. "And besides that offer of Doc's is a good one. No one around these parts wants this place—they haven't got the ready cash to pay for it."

Abner did not argue, but returned to his original quest by inquiring: "What you been figuring on that piece of paper?" His voice was insistent.

Forthwith Malcolm read from the paper, interspersing with detailed explanations. Said he: "I calculated that we could take fifty acres of this here Gold Hill, Incorporated, land and, providing we didn't make anything off'n it for two or three years, it would amount to a laying out of not more'n twenty-five hundred dollars for living expenses. But we're sure to turn some money almost right away for we're born farmers and know what to do with soil. Now see, that's twelve hundred dollars down for the land—fifty acres of it—and another thousand for the bungalow, which makes a cash outlay of only three thousand dollars the first

year. Of course, our railroad expenses we can't count in with the other because no matter where we go it'll be extra for travel."

"But you forgot water and light bills," reminded Abner, and thought he was clever.

"Oh, I counted all that in with the living," answered Malcolm impatiently.

"And what did you say it amounts to?" asked Abner whose memory for figures was a trifle below par, but who could grasp impressions at large much better than his brother.

Malcolm handed over the piece of paper with the amounts set down in pencil and Abner's brows, as he studied them, contracted into a frown which gave the impression that soon he would voice his objection and in no uncertain manner at that. Yet here, for once, the anticipation was not realized for without a word Abner arose and, taking his hat from the whatnot, set it resolutely on his head and crossed over to the door.

"Abner Spruce, where are you going now?" demanded his wife.

"Over to see Doc Meyer," he told her in a loud voice after a slight hesitation.

Mrs. Abner refrained from comment, but Malcolm, divining his brother's purpose, said:

"Good luck to you! I only hope you get five thousand."

Halting only a sufficient length of time to chuckle audibly and his tone ascending in its quality of boast-

fulness, he said: "I'm more likely to get it than you would three."

"Dreaming's good this time of the year," retorted Malcolm, pertinently.

But his sarcasm was lost, for Abner was outside already and did not hear.

An hour later Abner returned. His expression was almost pitiful, so crestfallen was it. During Abner's absence Malcolm had imparted to his own and to his brother's wife the news and the exact purport of the visit to Doc Meyer, so that now the three waited patiently and a little disappointedly, it is true, for Abner to announce his failure to consummate the deal. Yet, when more than five minutes had elapsed and Abner did not utter a syllable, Malcolm, no longer able to wait, chafed derisively:

"Gee whizz, Abner! I sure do like to hear some folks blow about the cream their cows give, then when you get a sample you find it nothing more than skimmed milk. It certainly is rich—not the cream, but the joke on you." Wherewith he gave vent to his mirth in a more or less uproarious manner, and in which he was soon joined by the two wives.

Abner's countenance remained placid, even a bit stern, but presently and very slowly he reached into the inside pocket of his coat and brought forth to view a neatly folded sheet of foolscap paper. This he opened out and handed to Malcolm, who, with a quizzical expression, read aloud:

" 'I, Sloan Meyer, do herewith agree to and bind myself legally to purchase within one week from date of signature the property known as the Spruce Farm, situate in Penn County, State of Pennsylvania, and which said farm belongs freely and solely to Malcolm Spruce and Abner Spruce jointly, for the sum of five thousand dollars ($5,000) cash.' "

Malcolm, when he saw the notary's seal and Doc's signature, grinned almost idiotically and almost involuntarily exclaimed: "Well, I'll be plumb jiggered!"

"Hm! You all thought I'd be turned down, did you? Hm! You all thought I was making a fool of myself, did you? Well, I just bluffed to see what you'd say and how easy you was. And you was as easy as a pair of old shoes that's been left unfastened. It sure is rich—not the cream, but the joke that's on you, not me." And Abner relaxed into a hilarious fit of laughing.

"But how'd you manage it?" queried Malcolm. "Did you hypnotize Doc?"

Abner shook his head negatively, then related: "Talk about the miracles in the Bible, this puts them all in the shade. It was this way: I goes to Doc all excited like and tells him I just had an offer of six thousand dollars, but that as he'd made the first offer, I'd let him have it for five. Well, Doc he sets for a spell, but didn't ask no questions and when he gets through thinking he totes me over to

Squire Beck's and—presto chango! he signs for five thousand."

Malcolm was a bit jealous of his brother and so to discredit to a certain extent the other's shrewdness, he arose and exaggeratingly imitated in a high falsetto voice and much to the amusement of the women: "Oh, sweet spirits of ammonia! Feed me corn fodder. Presto chango!—just like that—presto chango!"

Abner could see no laugh in this facetiousness; in fact it rather riled him, and so he returned haughtily: "Rave on, Old Scarecrow—you and Doc Meyer sure would make good pickin's for the first goldbrick drummer that set foot in this county."

Malcolm was sufficiently squelched so resumed his seat and said no more. However, that night two telegrams went to GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, one requesting an option on fifty acres of land and signed M. & A. Spruce; the other signed Sloan Meyer and requesting an option on two hundred acres. And, incidentally, these two options disposed of the remainder of the eighteen hundred acres owned by GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED.

CHAPTER XVIII

GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED

THREE months passed serenely. Every ranch of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, was sold and the landscape was dotted here and there with substantial new bungalows. But O'Conner and Hicks and Warren were not satisfied, for to date only forty-five thousand dollars had been paid by the individual owners of the ranches out of which nearly five thousand dollars had been expended for necessities, such as advertising, postage and trees, leaving only thirteen thousand, three hundred and some odd dollars for each on the divvy. The dissatisfaction arose from the fact that each of the three crooks wanted more divvy inasmuch as they knew that with the working out of the scheme properly they could get more. Yet while many an idea had been thrashed out, via the theory route, none seemed practical, either because it was too flimsy or because the result was not a dead certainty. However, through a chance remark made by one of the ranchers—it was really a suggestion—the proper scheme had presented itself and the three set to work on it.

Therefore, as James C. Ryan, President of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, sat in the office on this sunny afternoon, he dictated to each and every owner of G. H., INC., ranches:

"Owing to the most urgent need of ready money and the present National financial stringency, due principally to the war, GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, has decided to 'slice a melon,' as it were, and will cancel upon the immediate payment of one-fourth more of your indebtedness, the other one-fourth of the total purchase price of your ranch. Thus, instead of the ranches costing you fifty dollars per acre, they will cost you only thirty-three and a half dollars the acre.

"Can YOU afford to miss this wonderful offer?"

The letter worked like a charm, and by the end of that week there was in the coffers of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, twenty-two thousand, five hundred dollars more. Thus, the total divvy of O'Conner, alias Ryan, of Hicks, alias Lammert and Warren, alias Elgin, was twenty thousand, eight hundred and thirty-three dollars each.

. . . . . .

Early in the morning of the last day of August, Abner and Malcolm Spruce disconsolately surveyed a row of trees on their ranch.

"Malcolm, do those trees look sick to you?" queried Abner, with a worried frown as he indicated the entire ranch with a sweep of his extended arms.

Malcolm nodded his head and said: "They sure do—and it's a cinch that there's something wrong with them somewhere."

Just then Hiram Peck, a neighbor rancher, drew rein beside the fence and hailed the brothers with the observation: "I see your trees look about as bad as mine. I wonder what ails them? It certainly can't be the intensive farming that we've taken up and besides the weather having been fine all along, there's plenty of water." He came over to where the brothers stood and, taking several leaves in his hand continued: "These leaves look like mine—worse than blighted and they shouldn't commence to turn until October. I was in town day before yesterday and the ranches all along the line farther down the road are as healthy as they can be. I know what I'm going to do; consult Professor Kimberly next week." Wherewith he entered his rig again and drove away.

That night Doc Meyer was a caller at the Spruce bungalow. "Boys," he said, his expression the personification of gloom, "I don't like the way my trees are behaving."

"What seems to be wrong with them?" queried Malcolm.

"That's what I'd like to know—they all seem to be dying."

Doc Meyer's assertion settled it and immediately arrangements were made to consult Professor Kimberly in the morning.

Kimberly, in response to a telephone message, arrived at the Spruce ranch about noon to be welcomed by Hiram Peck, Doc Meyer, the Spruces and about half a dozen other GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, ranch owners.

Kimberly made a cursory examination of the leaves and some bark from one or two of the trees, then asked for a pick and shovel. And thereafter, for the greater portion of an hour, devoted himself to digging holes around trees in various parts of the ranch, not one of the holes being less than three feet deep. The others watched on with interest, asking no questions, but waiting for the expert to speak.

"Gentlemen," said Kimberly finally, while his eyes narrowed, "there is nothing the matter with your trees—they are perfect specimens of very good quality—the trouble is in your soil—no tree can grow in hard pan."

Hard pan soil! Those three words meant doom to the owners of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, ranches.

Continued Kimberly: "This soil is good for vegetables only. It is not even sandy enough for celery."

"What's it worth an acre, as it now is?" came the query from Doc Meyer.

"About five dollars an acre."

"But it will be more valuable some day, won't it?"

"Some day—if the city grows big enough it will

be more valuable, but you are some fifteen miles from town and as at present there are only twelve thousand people here, you can draw your own conclusions."

Without waiting for Kimberly to further enlighten them, and as if with one accord, the owners of GOLD HILL, INCORPORATED, ranches made a bee-line, as it were, for the offices of G. H., INC. And, arrived there, they met their final doom, for the offices were barren. Then and then only did they realize that they had been swindled.

CHAPTER XIX

ASININITY

The names of O'Conner and Hicks were mentioned for the first time in a year at one of the many conferences between Neill, Knight and Jeffries.

"They must be dead or else they are working in the West with fine results," commented Neill without any preliminary designations as to the identity of his "they."

Both Knight and Jeffries cast an amused look at the chief and wondered to whom he alluded. However, this mentioning of a continued strain of thought without denoting the subject or object was one of Neill's failings and known to the other two—he credited others with extraordinary powers of mental telepathy which did not exist.

" 'They' can mean the whole world, Chief," Jeffries reminded his superior of this shortcoming.

Neill looked up, smiled guiltily and informed his auditors: "Pardon me—I was thinking of O'Conner and Bud Hicks."

Consternation shone in the eyes of the Inspector and the Sergeant, and Knight asked:

"Have you heard of them or seen them?"

"No."

"Then why mention the names of two such trouble-makers? We ought to thank our lucky stars that they haven't been worrying us to a frazzle."

"I heartily coincide with Bill's views," exclaimed Jeffries vigorously.

Neill scowled and, after a hesitation of several moments' duration, he informed the other two: "I thought I saw O'Conner over on the boulevard to-day, but before I had a chance to get a close-up of him to verify my suspicions, the man had vanished in the crowd."

Both Knight and Jeffries were guilty simultaneously of an explosive oath, and Jeffries said:

"So they're back at us again, are they! Well, we won't give them a chance to spoil our peace of mind and start any sheenanigans. We'll get them up on suspicion and then get the judge to remand them as jailbirds. But I'm thinking they won't ever show up in this town again."

Voiced Neill: "I should think they'd be afraid to show their faces here seeing that we're still holding down our jobs, even against the change in administrations."

Decided Knight—and when he decided anything it was as good as an order: "There's one thing certain and that is that if we can help it they won't have a chance to even show us the reason for their presence in this neck o' the woods."

Knight had scarcely finished speaking when Morgan, the secretary entered with two cards and, as the former read the names thereon, his expression darkened and he gnarled aloud:

"Huh, speak of the devils and they're sure to appear!"

Neill and Jeffries were on their feet instantly.

"Let them come in and hear what they have to say, but don't let them leave here until we have registered them on the blotter," was Jeffries' needless advice.

"You didn't think we'd let them get away, did you?" said Neill more in the form of an assertion than a question. "Nor do I think it wise to allow them any privileges." Then, turning to the waiting secretary, he ordered: "Show them in."

The secretary retreated to the outer office and the three police officials turned expectant eyes toward the door: nor did they have long to wait, for almost immediately there appeared in the doorway James O'Conner and Bud Hicks. Both men were clean-shaven and modishly attired and had the appearance of affluence. And, like two vaudeville comedians, they smiled and bowed from the threshold, not in the least bit feazed by the greeting scowls on the faces of their three sometimes Nemesis.

Displaying utmost confidence, O'Conner and Hicks entered the room and without invitation seated themselves on the nearest chairs. Said O'Conner:

"Welcome to our city! We are honored—cer-

tainly—and hope that you will be with us for quite a while." He smiled extravagantly which, of course, aggravated the officials.

For several seconds the two crooks were the recipients of baleful glares, but this seeming to disconcert them not in the least, a sudden change came over the minions of the law and they thawed out with amazing rapidity.

Neill was the first to speak. Said he: "Things must have been coming your way since your escape from the penitentiary, judging from your fronts. But you had a nerve to come back here—as jailbirds."

Again the aggravating smiles and O'Conner related: "Oh, it wasn't so much nerve. And again it was. But we took our chances—thought that because of this wonderful display of nonchalance we'd deserve to be let off and not be compelled to go back to that Hell-roost up at the Capital. Seriously, we've had the time of our young lives the past year —everything came our way except new jail sentences. And why we get a cold reception here—the first one we've had since we worked our way to liberty—is beyond me; it isn't just."

"And why are we so favored?" demanded Jeffries.

"It was getting too warm for us in the West—that is, the police in the various cities we favored were making it warmer than we enjoyed," asserted O'Conner.

"And besides," augmented Hicks, "we like a change

of scenery—I think it was because we were getting positively homesick for the sight of the three of you and your bobbies."

The three officials could not refrain from laughing at this. And when the mirth had died Knight said:

"Well, I don't think we'll let you go away disappointed—you may have the same cells that you used to occupy while waiting for trial. And as to bail—you're jailbirds, you know, and therefore you have no say in the matter whatsoever."

"Is that a threat or merely a promise?" inquired O'Conner.

The bravado of the two men seemed to the officials to be a mild form of lunacy inasmuch as they had walked directly into the hangman's noose. And it worried them not a little to fathom to the basic reason for the voluntary return of the crooks.

Knight arose and crossed to the door which he closed and locked, then turning to O'Conner and his pal he answered assertively: "It's both and you two may consider yourselves under arrest."

"Trapped!" hissed O'Conner between his teeth, yet his voice was mocking and he evinced plainly that he considered Knight's assertion less serious than jocular.

"No—not trapped," corrected Knight, then explained: "It's just the wheels of the juggernaut of Justice turning swiftly and in the proper direction."

Hicks arose at this announcement, his cheeks white with rage. And he was about to utter a tirade when O'Conner checked him by pulling him back into his chair.

"Oh, if that's all, then we're perfectly willing to be under arrest," said Con while his face again expanded into an extravagant smile. He arose and Hicks followed suit.

Neill and Jeffries also now arose and came around to them, and Knight, who had been standing at the door, unlocked it to fling it wide. And then, with Knight leading the way, followed by the two crooks who in turn were followed by Neill and Jeffries, the quintette proceeded through the outer office. It was the intention of the officials to place Con and Bud in cells downstairs, but—

Con was in front of Bud and, just as Knight crossed the threshold, he permitted Neill and Jeffries to pass out before him and Hicks, then, by a swift movement, rightly and forcefully applied, he banged the door shut and sprang the lock. Neill's secretary, Morgan, was on his feet in a minute with a drawn revolver, but before he had time to level it, Bud, grasping the situation, pinioned his arms to the wall while O'Conner, with a deft blow, rendered Morgan unconscious.

Followed the opening of a window, an exit onto a small balcony, and a short walk around this to another room. The time required was measured in seconds. And, in the meantime, Neill was exerting

all his force to ram in the door while Jeffries and night ran downstairs to headquarters to give the alarm.

In the room which Con and Bud entered two policemen, with coats off, were loafing about waiting for the time of the new relief to come, their backs turned to the entrance way of the crooks and thus they were unaware of any alien presence until simultaneously each was grabbed by the throat to be choked into insensibility. This episode was the second in which Con and Bud were compelled to resort to mere brute tactics.

It was a matter of but a few moments for the two to change clothes for the policemen's coats and helmets, and when they emerged into the corridor, police reserves were running in all directions and in seeming consternation. So, taking a general hint from the excitement, Con and Bud also started to run, keeping their features well under cover. And thus they were enabled to make their escape.

CHAPTER XX

PREPAREDNESS

In a room of a second-class hotel two men were putting on disguises and from the cosmetics, rouge, cold cream, wigs, dresses, etc., which were strewn on bed, chairs, floor and other places, an onlooker would have thought the two individuals were actors of the first magnitude making elaborate preparations for an astounding drama. But the two men were merely O'Conner and Hicks, and they were on the threshold of putting through one of the cleverest jobs in their respective careers.

O'Conner was shaving himself sleek clean and applying lotion after lotion to his face, while under his breath he muttered, every now and then, the word damn. But after a while these mutterings stopped because he had succeeded in getting desired results, he had persevered until now his skin was as soft and as clear as the peach-blow of a woman's. Then he applied cold cream, powder and rouge with a deftness that would have done credit to an experienced masseuse or dermatologist.

Meanwhile, Bud was having much sport at the

expense of his pal and which Con bore nobly, soon falling into the spirit of it. Bud was donning the dress of a footman and had not a little trouble in making his elongated sideburns adhere properly. So, between the two of them, they laughed more than they had done in six months. And finally, between much twisting and squirming and squeezing and more laughter, O'Conner appeared as a woman of fashion, the deception being so good that even the keenest eye could not detect the difference.

Said Bud, with arms akimbo in the prevailing fashion adopted for the profession of butlery (American born, but erroneously British copied) and with the same haughty glare that people mistake for perfect English servitors, but which the real English butler considers a caricature of himself: "Madame Doctor Scoville, ze automobile izz vaiting."

O'Conner almost bowled over with mirth, but finally managed to say: "Don't start any of that monkey business—remember you're English and you've got to drop your 'h' in every word where it should be and stick it on hard where it shouldn't be."

"H'All right, ye blarsted h'idiot," said Bud, "h'I'll try to remember and do h'it."

O'Conner, with perfect grace, bearing and tonal inflections, said: "Very well, Deevers, tell Pequin that I shall be ready shortly."

This begot long and loud laughter and when the mirth had subsided O'Conner requested:

"Bud, where are those cigars of mine I gave you? I want one right now—this very minute."

Bud opened his service coat and drew forth two cigars, one of which he stuck in his mouth and was about to hand the other to Con when he halted with the expressed thought: "Nix on the smoke, Con. Do you want your breath to smell like a tobacco warehouse?"

"Well, one won't hurt me—especially as I have these perfectly lovely clove breath perfumes."

Bud, without a word, handed over the cigar and Con put it to his mouth, bit off the end and then, glaring at Bud with well assumed anger which soon exploded in the verbal railing: "Say, you, how in Halifax is a woman supposed to carry matches? And I'm not much on chewing cigars—never cared for any kind of a chew." He took the cigar from between his teeth and, eyeing it with critical admiration, ended with: "And it's some cigar at that!"

Bud dived into his pocket, drew forth a box of matches, ignited a splinter and, with all the assumed dignity essential to his character, carried it to Con. Then, waiting until his pal had puffed at it once or twice, he threw up his hands in mock horror, and exclaimed: "My, this 'ere's the first time h'in my life that I've 'ad a mistress what's smoked ceegars h'and I've worked for h'all kinds from 'ighbrows to lowbrows."

O'Conner frowned and directed: "Chuck it! It's about time we were getting busy if we're going

to pull off this stunt before next Fourth of July. And now, are you sure that you know your part?"

Bud nodded affirmatively and said: "I wonder what Chuck Warren is doing now. Let's see, it was six months ago that we left him in Salt Lake City spending his money like a drunken sailor and trying to swim in the lake."

"Post-mortems aren't in order," O'Conner uttered a bit impatiently.

"No, they aren't—but clove breath perfumes are and instead of asking me whether I know my part, you'd better be looking to your own p's and q's and not be making a small-sized chimney of your nose," retorted Bud.

Con frowned, growled, threw the half-smoked cigar onto a tray on a convenient table and, extracting from his purse a small box of clove breath perfumes, emptied the whole mess into his mouth from the box. And, after a short lapse, he approached Bud and, blowing his breath into the latter's face, inquired: "How's that—cigars or cloves?"

Bud made a wry face signifying that Con's breath was objectionable to him as he answered: "Cloves with a heavy accent. You smell worse than a 'Chinee' joss-house."

O'Conner now took up a handsome set of furs while Hicks relaxed into his part and together they trod down the steps to a waiting limousine, where Bud, after holding the door open for his erstwhile mistress to enter, and after she had seated herself,

closed it, then leaped into the seat beside the chauffeur and immediately the two were driven off.

Some distance away Bud directed the chauffeur to drive the machine to the curb. Here it stopped and the mistress alighted. She walked across the pavement, threading her way gracefully through the crowd in this shopping district and was the recipient of admiring glances from many women and more men, to the entrance of the exclusive jewelry store of Simpson & Burrell. This shop she entered.

CHAPTER XXI

A PROSPECTIVE CUSTOMER

Dexter Chalmers was manager of the exclusive jewelry firm of Simpson & Burrell and, at the particular moment when Mrs. Dr. Scoville entered, was being showered with congratulations by the clerks because of the announcement that morning in the newspapers of his engagement to Odette Simpson, daughter of the retired president. And, spying the new entrancée, he advanced toward her smilingly and in the winning tone he invariably used when approaching customers, inquired:

"Are you receiving attention?"

"Thank you," said the woman ambiguously and with the accompaniment of a dimpling smile. And she continued in a voice which denoted the quintessence of culture: "I am Mrs. Doctor Scoville—you know, of course, that my husband is the new head of the Cold Tar Products Company." The announcement was made rather proudly, it is true, yet without one hint of gusto.

Chalmers nodded, although he knew as much about the new company as the average person knows of

the verses of the ancient Yomato poets. He had read in the paper that there was to be a new industry located in or near the city and that was all; however, as he sensed a sale, he bowed again and inquired: "Is there anything in particular that I may have the pleasure of showing you this morning?"

The lady made a little moue, then hesitatingly assented: "Ye-es, I should like to examine some necklaces—diamonds, if you please."

Chalmers did not wait for another hint, but immediately stepped to the rear of the cases wherein reposed, in the most tempting and luxuriant manner, the costliest stones in the stock of Simpson & Burrell, and forthwith proceeded to place several necklaces on the small velvet-covered figures retained to exhibit in the most inviting fashion the appearance of the gems.

As the cases were in the rear Mrs. Scoville followed Chalmers while a footman trailed along and then stood by attentively at a respectful distance, bearing the handsome furs of his mistress, which that lady had discarded upon entering the shop.

Some little time was lost while Mrs. Scoville sought her lorgnette and when she had found it, adjusted it to her eyes and, examining the exquisite creations with critical approval, she confided to Chalmers with just the barest semblance of a pout:

"You know I did not really expect to come alone this morning, but the dear Doctor, my husband,

was so terrifically busy that he just couldn't spare the time to come with me." Here she paused to exclaim rhapsodically over two or three of the patterns ere she continued: "You see, to-day is our third wedding anniversary and that dear husband of mine promised I should have whatever my heart desired most. And so, as I've always wanted a diamond necklace I thought this would be such an appropriate time to get it. Oh, you have no idea what a perfect man I married—so thoughtful, so considerate, so kind! Yet it is positively sinful how very busy the poor dear is ever kept—scarcely a moment is there that he can truthfully call his own. Oh, indeed, he fully expected to come down with me to help in the selection, but when he found he could not be spared he simply insisted that I should come without him and use my own judgment. I suppose you have read we are giving a dinner-dansante tomorrow evening—that is why the Doctor was so insistent that I should have my necklace at once. You see, it's for the occasion and he's so particular in matters of that sort."

Chalmers was favorably impressed by Mrs. Scoville, for although her manner and her talk spelled neuvo riche, he was accustomed to this sort of gushing, and so now he merely nodded, signifying that he was well aware of Dr. and Mrs. Scoville's coming entertainment, although in truth he never even so much as glanced at the society columns.

Chalmers' prospective customer now turned to the

footman and instructed: "Deevers, I wish you would tell Pequin to take you over to the garage to inquire whether they have found any trace of the platinum ring I think I lost just prior to entering the opera last evening. Also, you may take the furs with you as I shan't need them—and be sure to tell Pequin to have the limousine back here in about a quarter of an hour."

"Very well, Madam," said Deevers, saluting and departing on his errand.

Mrs. Scoville again gave Chalmers and the necklaces her undivided attention. "Oh, my!" she exclaimed presently. "I do so wish that the doctor had accompanied me, for now that I am here and see so many exquisite treasures I find it very difficult indeed to make my selection. However," pointing to two necklaces, "it will be one of these," designating one necklace priced ten thousand dollars and another one priced seven thousand dollars.

"They certainly are handsome—in fact, the handsomest we have in the shop and I dare say, you could not find better in the city," agreed Chalmers. "And the stones are guaranteed pure blue white and absolutely flawless." He was far too good a salesman to venture too much word play on an article, for he knew that to become too voluble is worse than to be too reticent.

Mrs. Scoville continued to gaze longingly at the two pieces of jewelry, as if endeavoring to arrive at a final decision as to which she would purchase.

And, finally, raising her eyes in perplexity, she asserted: "I really should like to have the Doctor see these two before I make my selection. I wonder"—she hesitated—"I wonder would it be asking too much if you would allow me to take these to the plant to show to my husband. Cannot one of your clerks accompany me in the limousine?"

"Why, certainly, Mrs. Scoville," said Chalmers, only too willing to oblige. "I'll go myself." It was a daily request made to Simpson & Burrell and so, calling a store page Chalmers instructed that a black bag be brought to him. This bag he placed on the counter while he secured two plush jewel cases from a convenient drawer and placed a necklace in each case. Next he carefully deposited the two cases in the bag. His actions were not hurried and Mrs. Scoville watched him with apparently latent interest. Finished with this, Chalmers excused himself to get his hat and coat, however taking the bag with him. And when he returned a page inquired whether he knew if Mrs. Dr. Scoville was in the shop.

"Mrs. Dr. Scoville is right here," Chalmers informed the lad.

"There's a telephone message for you, Madam," the page stated and proceeded to lead the way.

The telephone stand was close by and Chalmers overhead:

"Yes . . . Hello, Honey! . . . Yes, Dear, I'm going to have one of the salesmen bring two up before I make a purchase. . . . What! You've been

called where? . . . Up the State? . . . When will you be home? . . . Not before six o'clock? . . . Wait until to-morrow morning? . . . All right, Dear. Good-by."

Mrs. Scoville slowly hung up the receiver while her expression was the personification of keenest disappointment and, turning to Chalmers, she said affectedly: "Oh, such a bother! Here the Doctor just telephoned that he has been called up the State to straighten out some little tangle and that he will not return until six o'clock to-night. But he suggested that if it will not inconvenience you, I call for you to-morrow morning at ten in the machine and drive you out to the plant."

"Why, most assuredly, Mrs. Scoville," Chalmers stated agreeably. "We do all that it is in our power to please our customers."

Mrs. Scoville smiled and, bidding Chalmers the time of day, swishingly took her departure.

Immediately Mrs. Scoville had quitted the shop, Chalmers consulted the Merchants' Credit Reference Guide and finding Scoville read: "B-1 plus." And, without being compelled to refer to the key, he murmured under his breath: "Hm! That's five hundred thousand to one million dollars, cash pay. And it's either a seven or a ten thousand dollar sale." And, consequently, he beamed.

CHAPTER XXII

AN EXCITING EXPERIENCE

Dustin Chalmers was ready to accompany Mrs. Dr. Scoville to her husband's plant when she called for him promptly at ten o'clock the following morning. And, as upon the previous day, the same footman attended and followed with the wraps. However, had Chalmers been more observant he would have noted the absence of a chauffeur.

En route to the factory, Mrs. Scoville conversed with pleasant animation: her manner was the happiest possible and whenever she mentioned the necklaces it was with many little, gleeful, staccato exclamations. And, withal, she was a very fascinating woman indeed!

Chalmers kept the bag containing the necklaces tightly clasped in his hand during the entire ride. Just prior to leaving the shop, he had taken the usual precaution to slip one of the newly invented hammerless automatic revolvers into his rear hip pocket, although he scarcely expected to use it.

After a long ride the automobile stopped and the now chauffeur-footman leaped to the ground and

opened the door of the limousine, taking the heavy fur wrap which Mrs. Scoville discarded the moment she alighted. Chalmers followed her out of the machine and, looking around for a busy plant, he saw only a rather spacious, old-fashioned house with no near neighbors. However, knowing nothing of the cold tar industry, his suspicions were not aroused and willingly he followed Mrs. Scoville up the plank walk to some low steps leading onto a veranda, while Deevers brought up the rear.

Mrs. Scoville started to ascend the steps and either her foot caught on something or else she had failed to see the second step, but the fact remained that at the moment she stumbled and sank to one knee. Chalmers instantly rushed to assist her while Deevers was but a slight second behind him. And, quite naturally, in aiding to get the lady to her feet again Chalmers was compelled to place the bag on the ground at his side. The entire time consumed could be reckoned in seconds. Immediately after Mrs. Scoville had regained a standing posture, Chalmers picked up his bag.

"So careless of me, you know!" exclaimed Mrs. Scoville, then continued flatteringly: "Nor do I know what I should have done had it not been for your gallantry, Mr. Chalmers."

Chalmers merely smiled.

Mrs. Scoville now led the way to the door which opened into a hallway. Deevers retired. The hallway was bare of carpets, furniture and mural dec-

orations. Leading off on both sides were several closed doors. Mrs. Scoville, picking her way daintily to one of the rear doors, flung it open and a minute later called to Chalmers who had remained stationary:

"Oh, Mr. Chalmers, you can talk to my husband in this room!"

Chalmers walked back and entered the room. There was a desk here before which sat a youngish man, dressed in the height of fashion and who pored over some papers. Mrs. Scoville had allowed Chalmers to enter before her and, as he advanced toward the desk, she softly closed the door and noiselessly locked it from the inside. And then things began to happen. Mrs. Scoville removed her hat with one swift movement and with it came a wig and, as quickly as possible she removed her dress, revealing a man where before had been a woman. Chalmers had his back turned and did not notice this transformation until he was confronted by a revolver in the hands of the erstwhile Dr. Scoville. And as Chalmers looked he was instantly struck by the similarity in resemblance between the footman and the man before him.

Not a slow thinker by any means, Chalmers turned to escape, but only to look into the barrel of a revolver held in the hand of the one whom he had thought was Mrs. Dr. Scoville. And in that instant he realized that he was in a trap—a clever one at that, for he saw the clothes of the feminine disguise

lying on the floor at the feet of the man. Nor had he any time to whip out his own revolver, yet even so he stood valiant guard over the bag.

"You needn't guard that bag," said he who had been Mrs. Scoville.

Chalmers flared: "You'll not get this bag as long as I'm living—you'll have to fight for it."

The two men laughed gleefully and the one at the desk informed Chalmers: "We don't want your bag and we don't want to hurt you as long as you behave yourself. That's not our game. In the first place, allow me to inform you that there are no jewels in the bag you are guarding, and if you don't believe me, why just have a peek yourself."

Chalmers stooped down and opened the bag to find it empty. When he straightened up again one man was on the right side of him and the other on the left. Thus his present position was little better than if he had been caught in an automatic vise; he was practically helpless.

In the hands of one of the men was a long, stout rope such as is used to moor a large launch to its pier berth. And while he was getting the noose ready with which to tie Chalmers, the other reached into the hapless man's pocket and extracted his revolver. After that, although one of them thoroughly searched Chalmers, looking for knives and other weapons, he was soon satisfied that the victim was further unarmed, and so, pocketing his own revolver and the one he had confiscated, he and his aide

proceeded to tie Chalmers securely with the rope. This done the two men walked to the door, it was unlocked and thrown open and they departed into the hallway. Here again a key was inserted in the lock. There was a click, the key was taken from its hole, and Chalmers heard retreating footsteps, the bang of the outer door, crunching on the gravel, the chug of an automobile growing fainter and fainter and at last nothing. Silence reigned supreme.

On the chauffeur's seat Bud Hicks said: "Well, my dear mistress, Mrs. Dr. Scoville, did I nab the right bag? I did. Was it a pretty risky thing to do? It was. Was it—"

James O'Conner interrupted Bud by completing the sentence: "—all very cleverly planned from the substitution of the bag when Mrs. Dr. Scoville, alias Jimmy O'Conner, purposely fell on her knee to the time known as the present—and all by little me? Decidedly it was! And that poor fool of a manager will have one lovely time in attempting to extricate himself. To whom is all credit due for the success of this coup? Why, to none other than Jimmy O'Conner. And because of that we'll be on the Limited at two-thirty-seven this afternoon—hours before that simp, What's-His-Name, can get loose."

"But how about the make-up?" inquired Bud.

O'Conner smiled and answered: "You're to be an Italian laborer while I—well, never mind what

I'm going to be. But what I'm going to do is to loll with luxuriant abandon in a Pullman while you are herded in a day coach with other swine."

Bud winced and commented dryly: "Hm! It comes easy for some people's children."

"So it does," agreed Con.

And thus the getaway of Con and Bud was consummated.

CHAPTER XXIII

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

Dustin Chalmers, securely tied, was clever enough to realize that he was the necessary victim of a pair of exceedingly clever crooks. But that was not the burden of his thoughts just now; his efforts primarily were directed toward freeing himself so that he might give the alarm and if possible apprehend the thieves with the loot on them. Consequently, for two hours, he worked frantically to loosen himself from the fetters which bound him so securely. And that he was not successful was not his fault. He had utilized every ounce of strength possible to garner and therefore, at the expiration of the time, utterly exhausted and, despite himself, he fell asleep. And when he awoke again it was dark night. Also, he was rather weak from hunger, but notwithstanding he went to the task of unbinding himself with renewed and feverish energy. And finally, at a little before nine, the laurel of success crowned his efforts. However, now that he was free another barrier arose, not a very formidable one, it is true, yet one which must be taken into con-

sideration, and this lay in the fact that in the process of extrication his clothes had suffered and he realized that in order to escape arrest as a suspicious prowler and thus delay the chances to catch the thieves, he must take to the shadows in order to reach his quarters.

It was an easy matter to raise the sash of the window and jump to the ground. Thereafter, by cutting across back yards and through open lots in a most cautious manner, he managed to reach his own quarters without incident shortly after midnight. Here, sitting on the bed for a moment's rest while he thought what to do first in the business of the capture of them who had so thoroughly duped and robbed him and his employers, Simpson & Burrell, for he realized that an active brain, one that is not so wrought up into a state of almost inconsistency by the pressure of experiences just lived is essential to the demands that aid in capturing crooks, he, without knowing it, and against his will, toppled over asleep.

It seemed to Chalmers that he had been asleep but a few scant minutes when he awoke again. He rubbed his eyes sleepily, full consciousness having not yet returned, after which leisurely he reached under the pillow for his watch. It was not there! Then, like a mighty draught, memory returned. One of the crooks had taken everything of value that he had had upon his person, including his watch. But

this was inconsequential as compared to the theft of the necklaces.

Came from the distance the striking of an hour; Chalmers counted the tolls—there were seven. He was thoroughly puzzled. And because through the blinds no light sifted as usual. Therefore, he stepped somewhat gingerly across to the window and raised the drawn shade. No, his eyes had not deceived him as he had thought, for the stars and the moon which met his gaze were realistic. Then he bethought himself to inquire the time from the telephone exchange.

"Seven-three," came the answering information.

"Seven-three what? Night or morning?" fairly yelled Chalmers.

"Night, of course," came back with a giggle.

And then it dawned upon Chalmers that he had slept all day! He was thoroughly awake now, and his first act was to notify the police of the affair. So, having attended to this by telephone, with a single bound, so it seemed, he leaped to the bath-room door and literally made the air blue with the epithets he called himself while shaving. Twenty minutes later he hastily emerged from his quarters and had no sooner reached the pavement than memory again served to tell him that he was without cash. However, and luckily he was known at the corner drug store. So he dived into his inside coat pocket for his check book only to discover that this

too the crooks had confiscated. Therefore, there was but one chance left: the clerk in charge of the drug store would give him five dollars on his I. O. U. This the clerk did.

Six months ago there had been a reconciliation between Silas Simpson and his daughter, and Odette had returned to her father's home just at the time when the firm of Burrell & Company had changed its name to Simpson & Burrell because Silas Simpson had become its President.

The Simpson residence was but a few short blocks from Chalmers' quarters—within ten minutes' walking distance. Therefore, at a little before eight Dustin rang the front door bell.

Odette herself answered the summons and flung herself into Dustin's arms with: "Oh, Dustin, Dustin, dearest, where have you been? What has happened? I've been simply frantic! And we've been trying to find you everywhere."

Dustin returned the loving embrace and then said: "I'll explain all when I see your father. Is he home? I must see him immediately."

As if directed by an experienced stage manager, just at this juncture Silas Simpson came upon the scene and the three, Odette, Simpson and Chalmers forthwith proceeded to the library. Here Chalmers at once plunged into a detailed recital of the entire tragic drama that had been his living experience. His recitation was concise, uncolorful and not exaggerated.

Silas Simpson listened attentively and when Chalmers had finished his expression was enigmatical; nevertheless, Odette and Dustin were not kept long in suspense, for he asked, his voice pregnant with suspicion:

"And do you expect me to believe such a cock-and-bull story as that, Chalmers?"

"Father! Father! Why, what are you saying? Don't you realize what an insult you are offering to my fiancé?"

Simpson's expression grew sterner and he answered angrily: "I'm saying just what I feel and think—nothing more and nothing less."

Chalmers arose. His expression was extremely pained, but even so, in a clear steady voice he offered: "Mr. Simpson, I have been in the employ of your firm for almost seven years, have advanced from an ordinary salesman to manager. I have been in your employ since you came to the company as President. Now, in all that time, I have never given you nor your predecessors any cause to doubt my honesty, my reliability, but here, at the first opportunity, you make the accusation that I have stolen two diamond necklaces. Not in so many words, but by your insinuation you have called me a thief without allowing me to prove myself. Therefore, I appeal to you. Is that fair? Is that just?"

Said Simpson: "Since I have taken charge of the firm I have investigated every employee. Rumors have reached me that for the past few months

you have been gambling pretty freely—and for enormous stakes at that. Need I say more?"

Chalmers laughed, but there was no mirth in it, and he said: "I shall not argue with you." And admitted: "I do not deny that I have been gambling, but I gamble proportionately, no more than you nor any of the other men at the Club—I keep within my bounds. It is my recreation the same as it is yours. You know that I draw a salary of ten thousand dollars a year and have no one to spend it on except myself. You also know that I have saved thirty thousand dollars—that I confided to you when I requested your sanction of my marriage to Odette. I am not in debt—have never been. Yet with all this you accuse me of stealing necklaces which are worth only about ten thousand dollars. Now, I ask you whether that is consistent or even clever?"

"Yes, it is clever—exceedingly so," Simpson asserted. "Thirty thousand dollars plus seventeen thousand—the amount for which you could sell the necklaces—make forty-seven thousand, and at the rate that diamonds are advancing, within the next three or four months you would be able to realize at least three thousand dollars more for your—your plunder. Quite a fortune! Quite a snug nest-egg! And clever? Under the circumstances it is a masterstroke! But what surprises me is that you should ever have condescended to work for a living."

"Mr. Simpson," said Chalmers, his voice firm with determination, "there is just one thing that I am going to do, that I must do—make you apologize, not now, but when I have proven to you conclusively that I have told you the absolute truth. And, moreover, your apology will come within the next twenty-four hours."

Simpson, even despite the ring of sincerity in Chalmers' voice, remained firm in the belief of the manager's guilt and verbally assailed him sneeringly by saying: "Oh, I do not doubt that it will be a very simple matter for you to prove an alibi. But don't think that you can hoodwink me for one moment. Your plans may have been cleverly laid and your woman accomplice would most assuredly make a capable actress. Also, you knew that your connection with us—that is, the recent announcement of Odette's engagement to you and the scandal and unpleasant notoriety which would follow your exposure would cause me to hesitate and to ponder long and earnestly ere causing your arrest. Yes, indeed, I have figured just as you did—that seventeen thousand dollars is dirt cheap to have paid for the discovery of your real character before it was too late. But I thank the great Jehovah that it is not too late."

Chalmers clenched his hands tightly at his sides and, standing rigidly erect, his head held up defiantly, he sought Odette's eyes. But not a word

could he utter, for he realized that at the present moment all argument would be futile, realized that he must prove his innocence.

Simpson now resumed: "I shall not dictate to my daughter—she is old enough and has sufficient sense to make her own choice. But she will have to choose, at the expiration of the next twenty-four hours, between a thief and her father. If she decides to accept you she must leave my house immediately—and if she does I shall compel you, one way or the other, to marry her at once."

Chalmers turned to Odette with his expression melting from well warranted, almost uncontrollable anger to insistent appeal. Yet what he sought for in Odette he found not, for she looked first towards her father, then toward Chalmers, without giving either the right. And then, the next instant, unnerved, she burst into tears.

Chalmers was beside her instantly, saying: "Odette, sweetheart, before God I told you and your father the plain, unvarnished truth. I want you to believe that. This is a test of your love for me. I do not ask you to believe nor to disbelieve me now. All that I ask is that you withhold judgment for twenty-four hours. However, if you elect, we shall be married at once, for I can get a position with Hennecke's at exactly the same salary that Simpson & Burrell pay me, and in the same capacity as manager. I have withheld this news all along because I had no idea of changing my allegiance and my

services. But now that I am forced into action I shall say that their offer is a standing one. I am ready to take you now if you desire to come."

Sobbingly, Odette pleaded: "Oh, don't, please don't make me decide to-night. I want you to wait until you have proven the truth of the affair. You said that you could—within twenty-four hours and—"

Said Chalmers with the sting of the deep heart-hurt, making his tones verge upon the sarcastic: "So this is what you term love! So this is what you term confidence—faith! You want proof of my honesty—you can't take my word for it. And this in the beginning—even before the beginning."

"Oh, can't you understand—won't you wait—please, please? Can't you understand that father has proven himself to me while you—you have had no chance? Can't you—oh, won't you understand?"

"Yes, I understand—understand that you are not convinced of my veracity—that you have no faith in me, in my competency to be trusted with your future. Yes, it is all perfectly clear to me. However, I shall ask you once more to decide—your father or me. Which?"

Sobs, only sobs was the answer.

Chalmers reached for his coat and hat and said: "Odette, I am sorry—heartbroken, but—I must ask you to release me from any and all promises that I gave you as I herewith release you. Your father is a witness. If you wish to return the engagement

ring, do so at your convenience, but if you keep it you will have merely a keepsake—it will not signify aught else." He walked slowly from the room and as slowly opened the door. There, with his hand on the knob, he paused, half expecting to hear Odette call to him. But the only sound was her sobbing. And as he crossed the threshold his eyes smarted and his lips were parched. So, almost blindly, he walked back to his own quarters.

CHAPTER XXIV

O'CONNER'S CAREER ENDS

According to plans, Buds Hicks, disguised as an Italian laborer, rode in the chair car of the same train that O'Conner, also disguised, rode in the Pullman. Bud had concealed on his person the necklace which would retail at seven thousand dollars, Chalmers' pocketbook and diamond stickpin, while O'Conner had in his pocket the necklace which would retail at ten thousand dollars, Chalmers' gold ring and watch.

A waiter from the dining car entered the Pullman with the familiar: "First call for dinner! Diner ahead!"

Instinctively, O'Conner drew forth a watch—Chalmer's watch—and opened it to see the time, and was about to close it again when his attention was attracted to a picture photographed inside the case. Frowningly he studied it and then slowly but well, memory served him, served to picture to him a Christmas scene where he, as a bogus Santa Claus, stopped before a church and was persuaded to enter by a young girl. And this photograph in the watch

bore a striking resemblance to that girl. Why couldn't he think of her name? He endeavored to do so and was about to give up in despair when he noticed in small writing across the bottom of the photograph the name, Odette Simpson. That was it! And as he still studied it an inspiration came to him.

The train entered a small town and a man alighted from the Pullman. It was O'Conner! He had not let Bud know of his intention—nor would be. Securing a time table he looked at it, then consulted the train bulletin outside the depot, saw checked thereon the fact that a train was due for the city he had just left and wherein resided Odette Simpson and Dustin Chalmers, within twenty minutes. So he purchased a ticket and a sleeper-berth and when that train did arrive, boarded it. Consequently, the next morning there stepped out of an automobile at the curb of Simpson & Burrell a man who, looking to neither right nor left, hurried back to the private offices in the rear of the store and asked for Mr. Chalmers.

"Mr. Chalmers is no longer connected with this firm," came the information.

"What's the trouble?" inquired the man.

"Don't know except that he resigned yesterday afternoon; however, if it's anything important, Mr. Simpson is here and you may speak to him."

This the man desired to do. And later:

"Mr. Simpson, I have something of the utmost

importance to communicate to you, but only when Miss Odette Simpson and Mr. Chalmers are present." This the introductory remark of the man, O'Conner.

Simpson was excitedly interested and in a stage whisper desired to know: "Has it anything to do with two necklaces—two diamond necklaces?"

O'Conner had taken the third degree several times in his life without flinching and, as this was mere play in comparison, he, without even batting an eye, insisted: "I said that I would not talk until the two persons I just mentioned are present."

Simpson saw there was nothing else to do so he complied with the stranger's request.

And half an hour later:

Odette Simpson was the first to arrive and, as she entered her father's private office, she halted abruptly, scrutinized the stranger and then exclaimed: "Why, Mr. O'Conner—what are you doing here!"

O'Conner was about to answer when the door opened again and the three inside beheld Dustin Chalmers standing on the threshold. And then, advancing with his finger pointed toward O'Conner, he cried:

"That's one of them!"

O'Conner did not flinch; he was not the sort to cower; instead, he remained standing. And after a momentary lull and looking at Odette he asserted: "Yes, I am one of them—and it is only because of

this little girl here and the fact that her picture was in your watch, Chalmers, causing me to put two and two together, that I am here at this moment. The other one, my pal, you will never get." He reached into his pocket, extracted a plush case, Chalmers' watch and ring and proffered them to Odette.

Odette took the articles and immediately opened the plush box, revealing therein one of the necklaces. Then, turning to Chalmers, she said appealingly: "I never had any doubt, dearest—and I was prepared to come to you at the expiration of the twenty-four hours."

Chalmers did the expected: he crushed the girl to him in a long and loving embrace.

Meanwhile, O'Conner had walked to the door and was about to exit when Simpson called to him to halt. And, turning about face, O'Conner looked into the barrel of an automatic revolver. But he was not feazed, for, wheeling about, and with one swift movement he banged the door behind him. And as he did so a shot rang out. There was a groan from outside and O'Conner sank to the floor, for the bullet had pierced a clean hole through the wood and found a home in O'Conner's body.

Odette was the first to reach him.

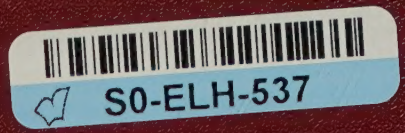
"I got mine at last—Miss Simpson—it was coming to me—and—and I guess—Neill and his—his bunch will be—happy," O'Conner managed to gasp.

"I'm sorry—so sorry for you, but—"

Odette saw that it was useless to say more, for O'Conner had breathed his last. And so, with a little shudder and a saddened expression, the girl sought the arms of the man she loved.

Thus ended the career of the notorious James O'Conner, alias Con, alias Wilkshire, alias Joseph Dodd, alias James Ryan, alias Mrs. Dr. Scoville, et al.

THE END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